



Dr. Lilith Ritter and the Femme Fatale Archetype in *Nightmare Alley* (2021): A Sociological Perspective

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026 - 06- 01 Revised: 2026 06-18 Accepted: 2026 06-28 Keywords: Dr. Lilith Ritter; female hero; femme fatale; neo-noir film DOI: 10.24256/ideasv14i1.11015 Corresponding Author: Azizah Nur Rahmadhani azizah.22080@mhs.unesa .ac.id State University of Surabaya, East Java	<i>This study examines how Dr. Lilith Ritter in Guillermo del Toro's <i>Nightmare Alley</i> (2021) subverts the traditional femme fatale archetype through intellectual rather than sexual power. Applying Yvonne Tasker's (1993) sociological framework of the "female hero" from <i>Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema</i>, this qualitative film analysis investigates five key scenes featuring Ritter's interactions with the male protagonist Stanton Carlisle. The findings reveal that Ritter replaces sexual seduction with three forms of professional power: intellectual authority (using psychoanalytic tools to deconstruct masculine performance), institutional status (controlling conversations and material evidence as a psychiatrist), and psychological opacity (remaining unreadable while accurately reading others). Rather than embodying male anxiety, Ritter critiques patriarchal systems by exposing masculine fragility through competence. This research extends Tasker's sociological theory to the neo-noir genre, offering an alternative reading of the femme fatale as a critique of systemic gender inequality rather than a symbol of male insecurity.</i>

1. Introduction

The *femme fatale* remains one of the most enduring and complex female archetypes in film history. Film critic Janey Place describes her as "the dark lady, the spider woman, the evil temptress who seduces man and brings about his downfall" (Place, 2019, as cited in Walsh, 2023). The term itself, French for "fatal

woman," emerged alongside the film noir style in post-World War II America, with the archetype's roots tracing back to ancient mythology in figures such as Lilith, Delilah, and Eve (Coleman, 2021). Jack Boozer argues that the *femme fatale* "sexually initiates in order to secure financial independence," directly challenging postwar expectations of female passivity (Boozer, 1999, as cited in Pearson, 2025). Within classic film noir, this character typically faces punishment—imprisonment, death, or forced marriage—for disrupting the patriarchal order. Feminist theorist Mary Ann Doane contends that such punishment reveals the *femme fatale* not as a genuinely autonomous figure but as a "projection of masculine insecurity" (Doane, 1991, p. 2). Seen through Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic lens of the "male gaze," the conventional *femme fatale* embodies a form of temporary, sexualized power that the narrative ultimately contains (Mulvey, 1975).

However, contemporary cinema has begun reimagining this figure in significant ways. Guillermo del Toro's 2021 neo-noir film *Nightmare Alley*, based on William Lindsay Gresham's 1946 novel, offers a striking example of this shift. The film introduces Dr. Lilith Ritter, a psychiatrist played by Cate Blanchett, who departs sharply from earlier versions of the *femme fatale*. As Blanchett herself observes, "*Femme fatales*, to me, often are sirens who draw men into the rocks, but for destructive reasons. Whereas I think Lilith is interested in bringing the system down. And that feels a very contemporary thing for a woman who's suffered extreme pain to want to do" (del Toro & Blanchett, 2021, as cited in Huff, 2022). Rather than relying on sexuality as her primary tool of influence, Ritter employs what critic Nicole Veneto describes as "analytical objectivity" as her greatest asset (Veneto, 2021).

This study applies Yvonne Tasker's sociological framework from *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (1993) to examine Ritter's character. Tasker moves beyond psychoanalysis by situating female characters within their social, professional, and economic contexts. She argues that action cinema responds to changing gender relations and therefore deserves serious academic attention. Tasker introduces the concept of the "female hero" or "dangerous woman"—a figure who navigates male-dominated spaces not through femininity or sexuality, but through professionalism, intellect, and economic power (Tasker, 1993, p. 19).

Recent scholarship has traced the evolution of the *femme fatale* across time and genres, revealing both the figure's persistence and its transformations. Several studies have examined how the archetype has been subverted in contemporary cinema through intellectual rather than sexual power. Wenyu and Yahaya (2025) analyze *Anatomy of a Fall*, demonstrating how the protagonist Sandra derives power from career and intellect rather than seduction, while Palombi (2022)

positions Jennifer Check in Jennifer's Body as a "new *femme fatale*" who reclaims a figure historically employed as "a symptom of male anxiety." Barbour (2023) argues that the *femme fatale* in *Gilda*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *Gone Girl* serves as an "authentic representative of powerful femininity" that threatens patriarchal systems. Meanwhile, comparative studies have illustrated the archetype's cultural migration across national contexts, including Chinese noir (Liu, 2023), Spanish crime films (Cancela, 2021), and French cinema (Gegen, 2021), while historical analyses have traced its influence on characters such as the Bond girl (Hasan, 2021).

Despite this extensive scholarship, no study has applied Tasker's sociological framework to a contemporary neo-noir text to examine how a professional woman's intellectual and institutional authority can subvert the *femme fatale* archetype and critique systemic gender inequality. Additionally, existing analyses of *Nightmare Alley* have focused predominantly on the male protagonist's psychological dimensions (Pascoe, 2022; Federika, 2023), leaving Dr. Lilith Ritter's character substantially under-examined. This gap establishes the rationale for the present study.

From this sociological standpoint, this article argues that Dr. Lilith Ritter fundamentally subverts the *femme fatale* archetype. She does not embody male fear of female power but rather functions as a critique of patriarchy, using her position within social structures to expose the fragility of masculine performance. The analysis addresses the research question: How does Dr. Lilith Ritter utilize the characteristics of a *femme fatale*, according to Tasker's sociological framework, to obtain power in a male-dominated society? The study has three objectives: first, to apply Tasker's "female hero" concept to Ritter's character development, dialogue, and narrative function; second, to analyze how the film shifts Ritter's agency from romantic entrapment to intellectual domination, as seen in her costuming, office space, and interactions with male characters; and third, to evaluate how Ritter's strategic use of power exposes the fragility of masculine authority, positioning her not as a destructive force but as a logical response to patriarchal corruption.

By extending Tasker's theory—originally developed for action cinema—to the neo-noir genre, this research offers an alternative reading of the *femme fatale* that moves beyond psychoanalytic and historical approaches, contributing to film and gender studies by demonstrating how intellectual professionalism can fully replace sexual seduction as the primary source of female power.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how Dr. Lilith Ritter subverts the traditional *femme fatale* archetype through sociological power relations. Qualitative approaches are particularly effective for explaining how individuals interpret social phenomena within their contexts (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020, p. 10). In this case, the social phenomenon is the cinematic subversion of an archetype, and the context encompasses gender power dynamics within

professional settings.

The analytical framework draws on film studies, treating the film as a coherent artistic text and cultural artifact. This approach examines cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, character positioning, and scene composition to reveal how the film either questions or confirms the femme fatale archetype. Special attention is paid to how Dr. Lilith Ritter is presented through camera angles, costumes, editing, and lighting (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019).

The primary data source is Guillermo del Toro's 2021 film *Nightmare Alley*. All scenes featuring Dr. Lilith Ritter, particularly those involving her interactions with the male protagonist Stanton Carlisle, were identified for analysis. The official shooting script by del Toro and Kim Morgan (2021) serves as a secondary primary source, providing accurate dialogue and scene directions. Secondary data include theoretical works on gender and popular cinema, the *femme fatale*, neo-noir theory, and reputable film reviews.

Data collection followed purposive sampling (Hennink et al., 2020), ensuring that only material directly relevant to the research question was included. Five key scenes were selected based on their representation of Ritter's character arc and her interactions with Stanton Carlisle. The selected scenes are summarized in Table 1.

No	Time Code	Scene	Analytical Focus
1.	01:03:32 – 01:04:35	Mind-reading performance	Clinical detachment and intellectual authority
2.	01:08:22 – 01:10:00	After mind-reading performance	Institutional status and control of information
3.	01:12:10 – 01:17:23	Ritter's office	Psychological opacity and reversal of the male gaze
4.	01:18:21 – 01:23:41	Therapy session	Exploiting vulnerability through professional competence
5.	02:07:42 – 02:11:15	Final confrontation	Intellectual trap and exposure of male misreading

Table 1. Selected Scene for Analysis

The analysis integrates film studies with Yvonne Tasker's (1993) sociological framework. Open coding was conducted using four categories derived from Tasker: power, professionalism, intellect, and seduction. These categories were operationalized as follows: power refers to instances where Ritter exercises

control over dialogue, space, or material evidence; professionalism encompasses her use of psychiatric training, clinical language, and institutional authority; intellect includes her analytical reasoning, psychological insight, and strategic manipulation; and seduction examines the absence of sexualized behavior, attire, or physical allure. Each scene was coded for evidence of these categories to determine whether Ritter's portrayal aligns with or departs from the stereotypical *femme fatale*.

To ensure analytical rigor, the following strategies were employed. First, multiple viewings of the film were conducted to verify observations. Second, findings were cross-referenced with the official shooting script to confirm dialogue and scene directions. Third, interpretations were grounded in Tasker's theoretical propositions and systematically compared with existing scholarship on the *femme fatale*. Fourth, direct quotations from the film were used to support interpretations, maintaining transparency between data and analysis.

Throughout the process, the film, theoretical propositions, and scholarly literature were constantly cross-referenced, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in both the film text and Tasker's (1993) argument for considering popular cinema within "both its cinematic and its political context" (p. 2). This methodological triangulation enhances the trustworthiness of the findings.

3. Result

Analysis of *Nightmare Alley* finds Dr. Lilith Ritter repeatedly substituting sexual seduction for three specific types of professional power according to the sociological model proposed by Yvonne Tasker. Through five specific scenes in the movie, Dr. Ritter showcases the ability of the "female hero" described by Tasker to interfere in the affairs of men by virtue of her intellectual superiority, her positioning within an organization, and her emotional dominance in the psychological sense.

While other *femme fatales* rely on their sexual charm as their ultimate weapon, Ritter's arsenal includes her mental capabilities, her professional connections, and the ability to remain emotionally impervious while accurately assessing the emotions of others. The next subsections will analyze each scene in detail.

Deconstructing Masculine Performance Through Clinical Detachment

In the opening scene featuring Ritter (01:03:32–01:04:35), she attends Stanton Carlisle's mind-reading performance with Molly. Ritter stands apart from the spatial dynamics of the show, observing Stanton's mentalism with a clinical gaze, as if examining a specimen. She volunteers as his subject and challenges him directly: "You say that you're real, and I say you have some kind of verbal code" (del Toro & Morgan, 2021, p. 68). Her tone is clinical, detached, and intimidating. Filmic language reinforces this dynamic: she avoids eye contact with Molly (the

conventional object of feminine allure) and fixes her gaze on Stanton, transforming the power dynamic into one of professional inquiry.



Figure 1 – 2. Dr. Lilith Ritter attempts to uncover the tricks behind Stan and Molly's mind-reading performance (Time Code: 01:03:32-01:04:35).

The lighting in this scene reinforces the power imbalance: only part of Ritter's face is illuminated, but her eyes remain alert and penetrating. By volunteering as Stanton's subject, she turns the tables, making him feel as though he is being diagnosed in a psychiatrist's office. She even uses the contents of her purse to perform the same kind of diagnostic analysis she would use on a patient. Ritter thus embodies what Tasker (1993) terms the capacity to "disrupt the certainties" of male-oriented spectacle (p. 19). Her resistance to male spectacle lies not in beauty but in professional detachment.

In short, Ritter follows Tasker's path for the "female hero." Her resistance to male spectacle lies not in beauty but in professional detachment (Tasker, 1993). Instead of seducing Stanton, she becomes his diagnostician, exposing how his magic trick works. Ritter's power is fundamentally epistemological.

Controlling the Conversation via Institutional Status

In the second scene (01:08:22–01:10:00), Ritter demonstrates power through institutional status and control of information. When Judge Kimball invites Stanton for a private discussion and asks, "Is she with you?" regarding Ritter, she interjects before Kimball can answer: "Charles wanted my opinion before meeting you" (del Toro & Morgan, 2021, p. 72). Cinematographically, Ritter enters from the background, gradually becoming more visible as she speaks.



Figure 3 – 4. Dr. Lilith Ritter, Judge Kimball, and Stanton Carlisle first meet after the mind-

reading show (Time Code: 01:08:22 – 01:10:00).

A key moment occurs when Judge Kimball searches for paper to write his address. Without a word, Ritter offers her business card, which Kimball uses to jot down the address. After finishing, he hands the card—now bearing the address—directly to Stanton, without acknowledging Ritter's contribution. The scene is shot in a series of close-ups: Ritter's hand extending the card, Kimball's hand writing on it, and finally the card passing to Stanton. Despite Ritter's temporary exclusion from the men's transaction, her card becomes the literal foundation of that transaction. By writing the address on her card, Stanton's access to Kimball depends entirely on an object that bears Ritter's professional identity.

In conclusion, the scene above is a representation of the argument presented by Tasker about the role of the professional woman within popular films, in relation to being the "gatekeeper" who uses her knowledge to mediate male relations (Tasker, 1993). Unlike in previous scenes, where Ritter gains access into male territory by using flirtations and seduction, she does so here based on credentials and objects.

Reversing the Male Gaze with Psychological Opacity

In Ritter's office (01:12:10–01:17:23), she demonstrates how the *femme fatale* can exert power over men through psychological means rather than physical seduction. As Stanton enters her office, Ritter with her back turned calmly says his name before he speaks. He asks, "How did you know it was me?" She deflects with another question: "What brings you here?" (del Toro & Morgan, 2021, p. 76). Cinematographically, the shot begins behind Ritter as Stanton enters, then slowly circles to reveal her composed face.



Figure 5 – 6. Dr. Lilith Ritter and Stanton Carlisle interactions at Ritter's office (Time Code: 01:12:10 – 01:17:23).

When Stanton attempts to "read" her personal life—noting that she lives alone and carries a small .22 caliber pistol—he tries to assert masculine dominance through interpretation. Ritter replies coldly: "If I want mud on my skirt, I can get it" (del Toro & Morgan, 2021, p. 78). She refuses to let him analyze her. Ritter's deeper manipulation occurs when she shifts from defense to offense. She begins discussing

Judge Kimball's background, gently coaxing Stanton to disclose information while maintaining control over the exchange. Her cool commands—"Don't write anything down. This is not a carnival trick. You are to leave no trace"—further demonstrate her authority (del Toro & Morgan, 2021, p. 80). When Stanton produces notes, Ritter burns the paper, showing her ability to destroy evidence while retaining everything mentally. Cinematically, the burning paper is shown in close-up as the flame consumes Stanton's handwriting.

In conclusion, Ritter exemplifies Tasker's statement where she asserts that "dangerous women hold power because they resist being interpreted while simultaneously analyzing others" (Tasker, 1993). Ritter is an enigmatic character who avoids being emotionally deciphered by Stanton and uses his attempts to analyze her as an opportunity to make him reflect on himself. The inverted male gaze thus serves the purpose of answering the research question.

Exploiting Vulnerability as Therapeutic Warfare

In the therapy session (01:18:21–01:23:41), Ritter turns the clinical setting into a battleground where her psychological insight becomes her primary weapon. As Stanton sits across from her, Ritter asks probing questions about his childhood: "Was he ever inappropriate or rude to you when you were little?"—alluding to his father's abusive alcoholism (del Toro & Morgan, 2021, p. 84). Visually, the filmmaker alternates between Ritter's focused gaze and Stanton's growing distress, creating a visual metaphor for the power dynamic.



Figure 7. Stanton Carlisle therapy session (Time Code: 01:18:21 – 01:23:41).

Ritter notes that Stanton "is still hung up on something" and describes him as "a little boy who never got enough love" (del Toro & Morgan, 2021, p. 86). She neither flirts nor touches him. Instead, she dissects his trauma with clinical precision. The climax comes when Stanton confesses, "I'm a con man, and I know that" (del Toro & Morgan, 2021, p. 88). This confession results not from seduction but from Ritter's intellectual force. Throughout the session, Ritter never relies on seductive dress, body language, or sexual appeal. Her power is purely intellectual, emotional, and professional.

Therefore, this counseling session is a testament to what Tasker observed about the fatal beauty of finding her strength in "extracting truth from men who consider

themselves unreadable" (Tasker, 1993). Ritter uses her expertise as a weapon to cut through Stanton's emotional barriers. She neither touches nor flirts with him. Her strength lies in her mind alone, thereby showing that trauma can be used instead of sex as an exploitative weapon for the femme fatale.

When Intimacy Becomes an Intellectual Trap

In the climactic confrontation (02:07:42–02:11:15), Ritter transforms from psychiatrist to predator, revealing that her therapeutic relationship with Stanton was always a calculated trap. When Stanton confronts her, Ritter pretends not to recognize him: "I'm sorry, Mr. Carlisle—Have we met anywhere other than this office?" (del Toro & Morgan, 2021, p. 112). By deliberately forgetting him, she strips Stanton of his belief that their relationship was unique, reducing him to a stranger.

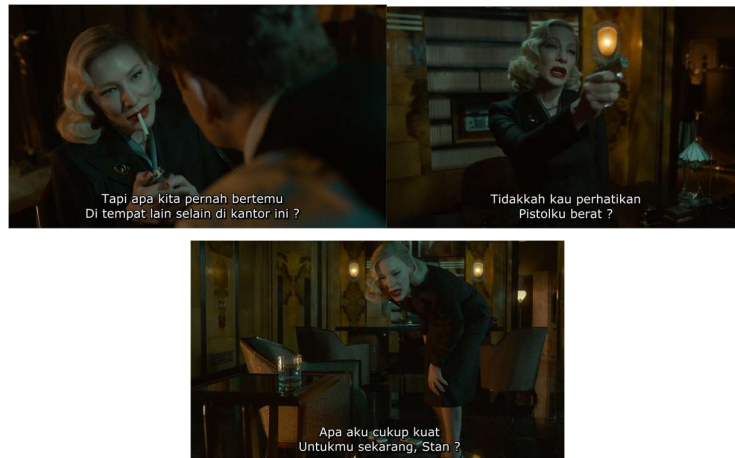


Figure 8– 10. Lilith Ritter final confrontation (Time Code: 02:07: 42 – 02:11:15).

As Stanton attempts to intimidate her through cold reading, Ritter shatters his ego: "You think you stand high above the common man, but you're just an Okie with straight teeth!" (del Toro & Morgan, 2021, p. 114). She then exposes his fatal oversight: "You can't read the signs... Didn't you notice my clutch was heavy?"—alluding to the pistol she now aims at him. Approaching the climax, she asks, "Am I powerful enough now, Stan?" before shooting him, and taunts, "You think you can take my breath away?" (del Toro & Morgan, 2021, p. 116).

This answers the research question explicitly: Ritter employs the qualities of the femme fatale – deceit, mystery, and mental manipulation – not to attract and seduce but to outsmart and manipulate with the help of intelligence and status. Her advantage lies not in any kind of sexual prowess but in knowledge, which allowed her to outmaneuver Stanton by virtue of him being overly arrogant. Through this scene, Ritter demonstrates that modern-day femme fatales do not have to seduce men to ruin them but simply have to be underestimated.

3.6. Summary of Findings

Table 2 summarizes the three forms of professional power identified across the five scenes, providing a clear overview of how Ritter replaces seduction with intellectual, institutional, and psychological authority.

No.	Time Code	Scene	Intellectual Authority	Institutional Status	Psychological Opacity
1.	01:03:32 – 01:04:35	Mind-reading performance	Uses clinical detachment to deconstruct Stanton's trick	x	Remains unreadable while reading Stanton
2.	01:08:22 – 01:10:00	After mind-reading performance	x	Controls communication through credentials and business card	Enters from background, gradually asserting presence
3.	01:12:10 – 01:17:23	Ritter's office	Uses deflection and silence as analytical tools	Controls material evidence (burning notes)	Refuses to be analyzed; remains opaque
4.	01:18:21 – 01:23:41	Therapy session	Extracts truth through psychiatric probing	Uses professional training as weapon	Maintains emotional detachment
5.	02:07:42 – 02:11:15	Final confrontation	Outmaneuvers Stanton through superior knowledge	Destroys evidence of their relationship	Reveals her performance was always an act

Table 2. Forms of Professional Power in Dr. Lilith Ritter's Character

The analysis of the five key scenes reveals that Dr. Lilith Ritter systematically replaces sexual seduction with three distinct forms of professional power: intellectual authority, demonstrated through her use of psychoanalytic tools to deconstruct Stanton's mentalist performance and extract his deepest vulnerabilities; institutional status, evidenced by her control of professional spaces, material evidence (such as burning notes), and the strategic deployment of her credentials as a psychiatrist; and psychological opacity, the capacity to remain unreadable while accurately interpreting others, effectively reversing the male

gaze.

As Yvonne Tasker observes, "dangerous women have power precisely because they refuse to be read and remain opaque themselves while they interpret others" (Tasker, 1993, p. 92). This pattern of power is consistent across all selected scenes, from Ritter's clinical detachment in the performance hall to her calculated final confrontation, where she reveals that her performance of intimacy was always an intellectual trap, asking Stanton, "Am I powerful enough now, Stan?". Ritter thus exemplifies Tasker's "female hero"—a figure who disrupts masculine certainties through competence rather than physical attraction, positioning her authority as fundamentally epistemological rather than erotic

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Dr. Lilith Ritter fundamentally subverts the traditional *femme fatale* archetype by replacing sexual seduction with intellectual, institutional, and psychological forms of power. This discussion interprets these findings through Yvonne Tasker's (1993) sociological framework of the "female hero" and compares Ritter's characterization with both classical and contemporary *femme fatale* figures.

Intellectual Authority as a Substitute for Sexual Allure

The analysis reveals that Ritter's primary weapon is intellectual authority, manifested through her psychiatric training and clinical detachment. In Scene 1, she deconstructs Stanton's mentalism not through flirtation but through analytical observation. This aligns with Tasker's (1993) observation that the "dangerous woman" in contemporary cinema finds her threat "not in physical attraction but in her ability to extract truth from men who believe themselves unreadable" (p. 95). Unlike classical *femme fatales* such as Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (1944) or Barbara Stanwyck's character who uses sexual allure to manipulate men, Ritter achieves the same outcome—control and domination—through intellectual means (Place, 2019).

This finding extends the work of Wenyu and Yahaya (2025), who demonstrated that Sandra in *Anatomy of a Fall* derives power from career and intellect rather than seduction. However, Ritter's intellectual authority operates within a more explicitly institutional context—psychiatry—which provides her with the vocabulary and frameworks to systematically dismantle male performance. As Tasker (1993) notes, "the professional female hero often controls the material traces of interaction—notes, recordings, objects—thereby determining what counts as truth or evidence" (p. 94). In Scene 3, Ritter's burning of Stanton's notes exemplifies this control over material evidence.

Institutional Status as Gatekeeping Power

The findings in Scene 2 reveal that Ritter's institutional status as a psychiatrist enables her to function as what Tasker (1993) terms a "gatekeeper" whose knowledge enables her to "act as mediator for male relations" (p. 88). This represents a significant departure from classical *femme fatales* who typically operate outside institutional structures. While figures like Kathie Moffat in *Out of the Past* (1947) rely on sexual charm to navigate male-dominated spaces, Ritter's entry into these spaces is legitimized by professional credentials.

Hanson (2007) observes that "the neo-noir femme fatale typically leverages documents, credentials, and artifacts of institutions to exercise her power within systems meant to marginalize her" (p. 141). This observation is borne out in Scene 2, where Ritter's business card becomes the literal foundation of Stanton's access to Judge Kimball. Her professional identity—inscribed on the card—mediates the transaction between the two men, positioning her as an indispensable presence even when she appears peripheral.

Compared to other contemporary *femme fatales*, Ritter's institutional power distinguishes her from figures like Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* (2014), who operates through media manipulation rather than professional credentials (Barbour, 2023). Similarly, while Jennifer Check in *Jennifer's Body* (2009) derives power from supernatural forces, Ritter's power is grounded in real-world institutional authority (Palombi, 2022).

Psychological Opacity and Reversal of the Male Gaze

The findings in Scenes 3 and 4 demonstrate Ritter's capacity to remain psychologically opaque while accurately reading others—a reversal of the male gaze that Laura Mulvey (1975) identified as central to classical cinema. Tasker (1993) asserts that "dangerous women have power precisely because they refuse to be read and remain opaque themselves while they interpret others" (p. 92). Ritter exemplifies this strategy: she deflects Stanton's attempts to analyze her personal life and instead subjects him to her own psychological probing.

This reversal is cinematically reinforced through *mise-en-scène*. In Scene 3, the shot circles Ritter to reveal her composed face while Stanton remains off-balance. Ritter's office becomes what Hanson (2007) describes as "an extension of her psychological authority, a place in which male protagonists are systematically disoriented and reconstructed" (p. 145). This contrasts sharply with classical noir settings where femme fatales are often framed as objects of visual pleasure (Mulvey, 1975).

The therapeutic setting in Scene 4 represents perhaps the most explicit subversion of traditional gender dynamics. Ritter's clinical probing of Stanton's trauma—his father's abusive alcoholism—reverses the noir convention of the male detective uncovering the femme fatale's secrets. Here, the *femme fatale* is the detective, and the male protagonist is the patient. This inversion echoes what

Adamatti and Uchôa (2024) identify as "inverting traditional gender polarities" through masquerade and professional authority.

The Intellectual Trap and Exposure of Male Misreading

Scene 5 reveals the culmination of Ritter's strategy: the revelation that her performance of intimacy was always a calculated act. Tasker (1993) argues that "the fatal beauty's final tactic in undermining her partner is the revelation that her performance of herself was always an act" (p. 96). Ritter's deliberate forgetting of Stanton strips him of the belief that their relationship was unique, reducing him to a stranger who misread the signs.

This moment resonates with what Bronfen (2004) describes as "fatal recognition"—the moment when the male protagonist realizes he has been fundamentally mistaken about the *femme fatale*'s intentions. However, unlike classical noir where such recognition typically precedes the *femme fatale*'s punishment, Ritter escapes unpunished. She not only survives but triumphs, shooting Stanton and destroying evidence of their relationship. This represents a significant departure from classical noir and from many contemporary films where transgressive women are ultimately punished (Barbour, 2023; Liu, 2023).

Comparison with Classical and Contemporary Femme Fatales

Ritter's characterization can be compared with both classical and contemporary *femme fatales* along several dimensions. First, while classical *femme fatales* like Phyllis Dietrichson and Elsa Bannister rely on sexuality as their primary tool, Ritter's power is entirely intellectual and institutional. Second, while many contemporary *femme fatales*, such as Amy Dunne and Jennifer Check, retain elements of sexuality in their manipulation, Ritter's performance is notably desexualized. Her costuming is professional and severe, her interactions are clinical, and her power is epistemological rather than erotic.

Third, unlike the black angels identified by Jaber (2025) in Woolrich's fiction, women whose criminality is motivated by love and devotion, Ritter's actions are motivated by neither love nor revenge against personal wrongs. Her motivation appears to be systemic: as Blanchett observes, she is "interested in bringing the system down" (Huff, 2022). This positions her as a critique of patriarchal structures rather than a figure of individual vengeance.

Implications for Feminist Film Theory

The findings have several implications for feminist film theory. First, they challenge Mulvey's (1975) assertion that women in cinema are inevitably positioned as objects of the male gaze. Ritter's professional detachment and psychological opacity effectively resist objectification, reversing the gaze onto her male counterpart. Second, the findings support Tasker's (1993) argument for examining popular cinema through a sociological lens, demonstrating how action

and genre films can offer distinctive roles for women that challenge gender binaries.

Third, the analysis suggests that the *femme fatale*'s evolution is not merely a matter of individual characterization but reflects broader sociological shifts. Ritter's power derives from institutional legitimacy—professional credentials, clinical training, and material evidence—which reflects women's increasing access to professional authority in contemporary society. This aligns with Chertian's (2022) observation that modern femininity in popular culture increasingly emphasizes independence and professional empowerment.

Limitations and Counterarguments

One potential counterargument is that Ritter's manipulation and deception might reinforce negative stereotypes of powerful women as duplicitous and dangerous. However, this reading assumes that the *femme fatale* must be a positive role model to be feminist. An alternative interpretation, following Doane (1991), is that the *femme fatale*'s subversive function lies precisely in her refusal to conform to feminine ideals of passivity and virtue. Ritter's power, while manipulative, exposes the fragility of masculine authority and the structures that sustain it.

Another limitation is the study's singular focus on one film and one female character. While this enables in-depth analysis, it limits generalizability. Future research could compare Ritter with other non-seductive *femme fatales* in contemporary cinema, such as Marla Grayson in *I Care a Lot* (2020) or Sandra in *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), to identify patterns and variations in professional female power.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to film and gender studies by extending Tasker's (1993) sociological framework from action cinema to the neo-noir genre. The analysis demonstrates that Tasker's concept of the "female hero"—a figure who navigates male-dominated spaces through professionalism and intellect—is applicable beyond action films to contemporary noir. This extension offers new possibilities for analyzing female characters across genres and suggests that sociological frameworks can complement psychoanalytic approaches in understanding cinematic representations of gender.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined how Dr. Lilith Ritter in Guillermo del Toro's *Nightmare Alley* (2021) subverts the traditional *femme fatale* archetype by replacing sexual seduction with intellectual, institutional, and psychological forms of power. The analysis, grounded in Yvonne Tasker's (1993) sociological framework of the "female hero," demonstrates that Ritter's authority derives not from physical allure but from professional competence, clinical detachment, and the strategic deployment of psychiatric knowledge within male-dominated institutional spaces.

The findings across five key scenes reveal a consistent pattern: Ritter exercises intellectual authority by deconstructing masculine performance through psychoanalytic tools (Scene 1); she leverages institutional status to control conversations and material evidence as a psychiatrist (Scene 2); she maintains psychological opacity while accurately reading others, thereby reversing the male gaze (Scene 3); she exploits vulnerability through therapeutic warfare, extracting truth from a man who believes himself unreadable (Scene 4); and she culminates her strategy by revealing that her performance of intimacy was always a calculated intellectual trap (Scene 5). These findings collectively demonstrate that Ritter embodies Tasker's "female hero" by disrupting masculine certainties through competence rather than sexuality, positioning her power as epistemological rather than erotic (Tasker, 1993, p. 19).

The study contributes to film and gender studies by extending Tasker's sociological theory—originally developed for action cinema—to the neo-noir genre. This extension offers an alternative reading of the *femme fatale* that moves beyond psychoanalytic interpretations (Mulvey, 1975; Doane, 1991) toward a sociological understanding of how professional women navigate and critique patriarchal systems. Unlike classical *femme fatales* who are ultimately punished for transgressing patriarchal order, Ritter escapes unpunished, functioning not as a symbol of male anxiety but as a critique of systemic gender inequality (Barbour, 2023; Palombi, 2022).

However, this analysis is limited by its singular focus on one film and one female character. The findings may not be generalizable to other neo-noir films or to *femme fatale* figures in different genres. Additionally, the study does not examine audience reception, which would provide insight into how viewers interpret Ritter's character—whether as an empowered figure or as a reinforcement of negative stereotypes about powerful women.

Future research could compare Ritter with other non-seductive *femme fatales* in contemporary cinema, such as Marla Grayson in *I Care a Lot* (2020) or Sandra in *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), to identify patterns and variations in professional female power across genres (Wenyu & Yahaya, 2025). Comparative analysis between del Toro's 2021 film and its 1947 predecessor would illuminate how changing gender relations have shaped the portrayal of professional *femme fatales* over time. Reception studies employing surveys or interviews could determine how audiences perceive such characters—whether as empowered women or as another form of patriarchal anxiety. Finally, examining various occupational spheres—law, business, technology—as sources of female empowerment that differ from seduction would extend the sociological analysis of gender and institutional power in popular cinema.

In conclusion, Dr. Lilith Ritter represents a significant evolution of the *femme fatale* archetype, one that reflects contemporary women's increasing access to professional authority while simultaneously critiquing the patriarchal structures

that have historically confined female power to the realm of sexuality. Through Tasker's sociological lens, Ritter emerges not as a destructive force but as a logical response to patriarchal corruption—a figure whose power, though manipulative, exposes the fragility of masculine authority and the systems that sustain it.

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