Basic Instinct at 30
Jamieson, Gill

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Sexy, glamorous and provocative, Basic Instinct was one of the most notorious films of the 1990s. It broke new ground for its shocking portrayal of on-screen nudity (galvanised by its famous leg-crossing interrogation scene) despite delivering a plot full of holes and some excruciating dialogue: “He got off before he got offed.”

But Paul Verhoeven’s film was all about star power: the elusive charisma that elevates a one-dimensional part into an iconic role that defines the historical moment. Sharon Stone and Michael Douglas both had bags of it and their assured performances propelled the film to become one of the biggest hits of the decade.

Basic Instinct is a derivative erotic thriller, a slick 1990s film noir with questionable artistic credentials and even more questionable morality. It sought to emulate the psychosexual tension of a Hitchcock thriller with the San Francisco setting and the Hitchcockian blonde, but it never quite captured the style or complexity of a masterpiece like Vertigo.

Basic Instinct featured a flawed cop and a puzzling murder mystery centred on erotic misadventure. Unusually for a Hollywood film, it seemed to be pushing the boundaries of what was permissible in the portrayal of sex on screen. But above all, the film will always be remembered for catapulting Sharon Stone to global superstardom.
A once-in-a-generation part, it persists in the memory because of the sheer charisma of the leading lady. Every generation needs its own femme fatale: Double Indemnity (1944) gave us Barbara Stanwyck’s Phyllis Dietrichson, Klute (1971) gave us Jane Fonda’s Bree Daniels and Body Heat (1981) launched an impossibly sizzling Kathleen Turner as Matty Walker.

Stone is the reason so many feminist critics such as Camille Paglia championed the film despite the deeply troubling and regressive ideas it presented about gay, lesbian and bisexual sexualities. These are posited in the story as dangerous and quite simply deadly.

**Power Games**

Film noir is always about money and power, the prime motivator for the femme fatale who uses her sexual allure to get what she wants. Films like these stand out because the women have the chutzpah to seek financial independence from men.

Think about Brigid O'Shaughnessy in The Maltese Falcon. This noir heroine doesn’t want to be beholden to any man, so she goes out and gets what she needs to make her own way. Of course for feminist critics this is thrilling. Empowering. Even if, as inevitably is the case, we are positioned with the male character – typically a private detective or a cop who strays in a moment of weakness and becomes in thrall to the woman.

Feminist film scholars have recognised film noir as an important genre for the complexity of the female characters – marking a re-evaluation of gender roles during the post-war period. Stone’s Catherine Trammel is an atypical femme fatale in that she is already independently wealthy with a successful career as a writer of bestselling crime thrillers. She doesn’t need money. And yet she is still decidedly deadly.
Her motives are wholly about sexual pleasure. She surrounds herself with killers; chief amongst them being her sidekick Roxy and her friend Hazel Dobkins – the former murdered her brothers and the latter killed her husband and children. Both are motiveless crimes notable for their family context.

At the beginning of the film, Catherine's lover is murdered and she quickly becomes a suspect. But she refuses to conform to expectations. For the detectives who interrogate her, she becomes the classic spider woman of film noir – the seductive femme who weaves her tangled web around unsuspecting and foolish men. Catherine is sexually active and takes her pleasure without apology.

In the famous interrogation scene, the staging is deliberately antagonistic. She is surrounded by male detectives who fire questions at her. She fires them right back. The battle lines are drawn and Catherine comes out on top, confounding them with her sexual prowess and lack of regard for conventional morality.

She enjoyed having sex with the dead guy. But she's not overly emotional about the fact that he is dead. She challenges the youngest and most attractive cop, Nick (Douglas), about his marriage and possible cocaine use. She defiantly maintains eye contact and crosses and uncrosses her legs revealing her lack of underwear. She's the ultimate provocateur, toying with Nick and humiliating him in front of his colleagues.

**Triumph of the femme fatale**

In classic noir the femme fatale presents a complex puzzle to be solved by the leading male: she rarely, if ever, “gets away with it”. Inevitably this is construed as punishment for her sexual excess, something that cannot be contained within heteronormative society.
But this very particular 1990s neo-noir abandoned these tropes to present the difficult woman as the victor. Stone’s ice-blonde femme fatale triumphs, just like Turner’s Matty Walker in Body Heat. At that film’s close, Matty is seen enjoying a well-earned cocktail on a tropical beach while the man she fooled languishes in a prison cell back home.

Basic Instinct continued the trend with Catherine Trammel getting away with it. There is no doubt that this is Nick’s story; he is following the evidence, making the case. But fundamentally he is a sap who falls into bed with a woman who might conceivably murder him at some point.

And as the camera tracks back in the final sex scene we can see the ice pick under her bed. The cat and mouse game is over and we know she is guilty after all. Finally – and for the first time in the story – we are positioned with Stone’s cool, fearless killer.