Crossing legs, gender and genre (Catherine Tramell: a portrait of a woman writer as a postmodern femme fatale)

Juan Senís Fernández

Abstract
Catherine Tramell – the iconic heroine of Basic Instinct and its sequel, Basic Instinct 2. Risk Addiction – is the last great femme fatale of the 20th century. Rich, blonde, elegant, smart, attractive and cultivated, she has almost all the aspects of this archetype: she seduces and manipulates men (and eventually kills them) and she is bisexual. Nevertheless, she is a postmodern femme fatale, so she is not punished at the end of the film and she can keep manipulating people, having sex with men and (eventually) killing them.

However, Catherine Tramell is also a successful writer of crime fiction. The skills she gained from her double degree in Literature and Psychology help her to write, mostly because she uses her femme fatale experiences for her books. But she does not wait for the ideas to fall onto her desk: she manipulates reality and does not hesitate to willingly kill people in order to inspire herself. She searches for crimes, since she cannot live (or write) without them. That’s what makes her a fascinating character: the combination of the writer and the femme fatale in the same woman.

The result of this unique mixture affects not only the level of the character, but also the plot of the movie. And all these consequences will be explained in this paper, focusing on two aspects. First of all, the way in which Catherine Tramell can be considered a postmodern version of the classical archetype of the villain femme fatale; and, secondly, how this combination of spider woman and crime fiction writer creates an original and brilliant thriller such as Basic Instinct.

Key Words: Basic Instinct, Catherine Tramell, femme fatale, women writers, gender, genre.

1. Crossing legs
When in Paul Verhoeven’s film Basic Instinct (1992) Sharon Stone uncrossed her legs in front of a bunch of astonished policemen – and in front of a no less astonished wide world audience – she became a movie star and her character, Catherine Tramell, the most charismatic anti-heroine of the last years of the twentieth century. A real character actually, she survived not only the controversy about homophobia that marked the première of the film but also a late sequel,
Basic Instinct 2. Risk Addiction (2006), where she turns out to be such a caricature of herself, making the film seem more a parody than a serious attempt to continue the saga. Failed sequel apart, what is particularly interesting about Catherine Tramell, among other aspects, is the way in which the femme fatale and the crime fiction woman writer coalesce into a fascinating character. She is the only femme fatale woman writer in the history of cinema, and that mixture deserves at least some attention.

This paper, therefore, undertakes a closer examination of this rare combination. It is organized as follows. Section I (Crossing gender) focuses on Catherine Tramell as a femme fatale, in order to determine what traditional traits of this feminine archetype remain in her and what new attributes contribute to create a sort of revisited one. Section II (Crossing genre) explains what kind of a woman writer Catherine Tramell is and how this condition determines the plot of the film. Finally, the conclusion (The thread of the spider woman) establishes briefly how the femme fatale and the woman writer are intertwined in the character.

2. Crossing gender

The femme fatale emerged as a central figure in the nineteenth century, in the texts of writers such as Gautier and Baudelaire and painters such as Moreau and Rossetti. Since her birth until her ultimate consolidation by Hollywood film noir, this archetype has given inception to a vast and rich genealogy of characters and myths that leads to Pandora and Lilith, who was expelled from Paradise because she refused to be under the man during the copula. The link between Catherine Tramell and Lilith is clearly established at the very beginning of Basic Instinct, when she refuses to be under the man during sexual intercourse and decides to take the lead. In addition to that, there are other reasons why she is a femme fatale and the last scion of this rich lineage of feminine characters Erika Bornay has called “Lilith’s Daughters”. As well as her perverse and dark beauty and her animal bisexuality, she has the most striking characteristic of the femme fatale: “the fact that she never really is what she seems to be”.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Catherine’s bisexuality does not mean that she has equal feelings for men and women. Quite the opposite, the contrast between her love for women and her sexual coldness for men is one of the main reasons why Catherine Tramell can be considered not just another femme fatale, but an original one.

Along with men, in Basic Instinct Catherine has a sexual relationship with a young woman, Roxy, who dies accidentally when she tries to kill Nick Curran with her car out of jealousy. Catherine seems really moved after that. In fact, it is the only moment of the film when she allows herself to cry in front of Nick. At the beginning of the film, when Nick and Gus tell her that her masculine sexual partner has been brutally murdered, she receives the news with a surprising coldness. This contrast shows that Catherine’s love for women is not exclusively sexual. Besides,
Catherine sets aside tenderness for Hazel Dobkins, maybe the only maternal figure in a film that lacks maternal feelings. After being followed by Nick in another of the highlighting sequences of the film – the car chase through the coastal road –, Catherine parks her sport car in a residential town and goes into a house like anyone else in the neighbourhood. When she leaves it several hours later, Nick sees her talking with an old fairy-like woman. There is something truly familiar, tender and relaxed in this short conversation, as if for the first time in the film another layer of the mysterious Catherine was revealed to Nick. One can almost think that she is a lovely daughter who is paying her weekly visit to her old mother. But Hazel Dobkins is far from being a conventional mother. She was convicted of killing her husband and her children, slashing them to death with a knife she received as a wedding present. Initially a research interest for Catherine’s writing, her relationship has become deeper than this. Roxy is also a former murderer and thus a research interest for Catherine insofar as she killed her brothers with a razor blade when she was a teenager. Even if Catherine’s primary interest in these two women could be more professional than personal, both Hazel and Roxy function as signs that Catherine is capable of forming lasting, affectionate bonds with women.

Catherine is therefore homosexual in the way that Luce Irigaray points out in *Le corps-à-corps avec la mère*, where she distinguishes between primary homosexuality (the bond linking the mother and the daughter) and secondary homosexuality (the love between women themselves, not exclusively sexual).

The latter links Catherine and Roxy, and the first can be found in the relationship between Catherine and Hazel. According to Lynda Hart, “Catherine reserves real love for women.”

Men are for sex, women for friendship or tenderness. Catherine’s behaviour with men is hence completely different. Even though both the detective Nick Curran and the psychiatrist Michel Glass are too case studies for her, she does not form warm bonds with them and she treats them with a cold detachment. But Catherine spares the two men from death. Does it mean that the force of love redeems the femme fatale as it occurs sometimes in the Hollywood classic film noir? Of course not, and that is one of the reasons why Catherine Tramell is such a unique character. Traditionally, the femme fatale has had two final options: either she accepts the masculine laws of gender or she dies as a result of a final punishment for her socially queer behaviour.

Catherine Tramell avoids these two options in both films. At the end of *Basic Instinct*, when Curran proposes that they “fuck like minks, raise rugrats, and live happily ever after”, Tramell only answers: “I don’t like rugrats”. But the film does not end with these last words; instead, the camera pans down from the bed to reveal the ice pick.

As Miranda Sherwin points out, “*Basic Instinct* deviates from the traditional *femme-fatale* film, in that it neither establishes Tramell as the right woman, innocent of all charges (...), nor punishes her for her guilt.” This narrative pattern is also maintained in *Basic Instinct 2*, where she does not kill Michael, but
provides his reclusion in an asylum. In both cases, the main question – Who has done it? – is not clearly answered.

But if Catherine is definitively the murderer, another question arises: what does she do it for? She does not do it for money, because she is independently wealthy. She has no noble purpose that justifies her conduct, like love or family. She does not obtain anything from her murders but her pleasure. Catherine Tramell can thus be considered “an exemplary ludic (post)modern subject”9 who challenges gender roles, a new kind of femme fatale to the extent that, in spite of the traits that connect her with another of Lilith’s daughters, she is not expelled from her everlasting pleasure paradise, so she can keep loving women, fucking men and, mostly, writing.

3. Crossing genre

It seems so no accident that the plots of more than one of her published novels parallel events in her life. If The First Time tells the story of a boy who kills his parents provoking a plane crash (and Catherine herself lost her parents in a boat accident, leaving her a fortune), in Love Hurts a retired rock star is murdered with an ice pick, as is Catherine’s sex partner at the beginning of the film. This sort of parallelism, which can be found more often than not in films where a writer is a main character, is a case of what Gerard Genette10 has called métalepse, since there are two levels intertwined: one is the story of the writer in the film, that is assumed as real by the spectator, while the other is constituted by the stories this writer creates. The combination of these two levels use to be a quite simple structure where the spectator can conclude that what the writer has written (the fiction) is directly inspired by the real facts of the story. That is the reason why there are so many films about a writer suffering from blank page syndrome who searches a story for a new book.

Catherine Tramell, on the other hand, does not let blank page syndrome come to her and does not wait for the ideas to fall onto her desk. Instead, she manipulates reality in order to inspire herself and construct the plot of her novels. When she finishes her books, she leaves the men with whom she has been sexually involved because they have already fulfilled their duty. As a femme fatale, she uses them for her main pleasure, which is writing. But, apart from her sexuality and her wit, she also has another weapon to achieve her goals, a perfect one insofar as it is harmless and does not imply her as a crime suspect: her writing. Using it well, as she actually does, she does not need to shoot men or to stab an ice pick into their bodies. She only has to put her drafts in the right place and wait for the male victim to fall into her trap.

That is what happens in Basic Instinct. When Nick returns to the beach house after recounting some evidence that implicates Beth and seems to exonerate Catherine, he has a terrible discovery. The book cover of the novel based on him, Shooter, is on the table, the text is printing out and here is Catherine, recovered
from the weakness she showed after Roxy’s death, done with him because she had
finished her book. She is turned into a femme fatale again, toying with the male.
She says good-bye and goes upstairs, where Hazel Dobkins is waiting for her.
Some hours later, Nick meets upstairs, where Hazel Dobkins is waiting for her. Some hours later, Nick meets his police buddy Gus and they go to Oakland in
order to find Catherine’s former college roommate. Gus is feeling very exited
because he thinks he now is going to find the keys to resolve the case. He has a
rendezvous with a girl who told him the whole story about Catherine and Beth
back in Berkley. When they arrive at the address, only Gus enters the building
because Nick is on leave. He is so absorbed in his romantic problems that he is not
thinking clearly, and it is only after a while that Nick remembers the excerpts of
Catherine’s novel that he could read early that day: “Shooter pounds the elevator
bottom, then raced for the stairs … His partner’s death body”. Immediately, he
leaves the car and runs to the building, where he finds, of course, “his partner’s
dead body”, just at the novel describes it. After that, Nick accidentally kills Beth,
the other prime suspect, who is finally found guilty by the policemen because of
the evidences they discover in her apartment. But Catherine did it, and in this case
she only uses her words and Nick. It could not be by chance that Catherine lets
Nick read this part of her novel. Chance does not exist when it comes to Catherine.

This manipulating strategy becomes even clearer in Basic Instinct 2. Almost at
the end, Michael goes to Catherine’s place and, after a violent argument during
which she acknowledges her crimes, she gives him a CD with the draft of her new
novel, The Analyst. Nervous and upset, Michael returns home and begins to read it.
The plot and the characters are familiar to him and to the spectator. The main
character is a blond American novelist called Kelly who meets an analyst during
her little stay at prison. She also gets acquainted with another analyst, an older
woman called Irena with whom she feels a deep affinity and becomes closer. “It
was a pity – tells the story – Kelly was going to have to kill her”. At this point
Michael stops reading and rushes to her colleague Milena’s house, the model for
the character of Irena. On the way, he tries to reach her on the phone, but she does
not answer. When he finally gets there and tells Milena that Catherine is going to
kill her, not only does she not believe him, but also she accuses him of having
assaulted her as a patient by having sex with her. In the middle of the argument,
Catherine enters in the room. Michael accuses her by quoting her book: “Kelly
Lash kills Irena … No, I read your book”. But Catherine answers: “It’s just a story,
doctor. Or maybe I’m really omnipotent”. Even if it is just a story, Michael
believes that there is some truth in it, so the power of Catherine’s novel as a
weapon to nullify a man is even stronger here than in Basic Instinct. First, she
manages to attract him to the place where she is and to put him in an exited state of
mind. Once there, she keeps provoking him by accusing the policeman Washburn
of committing a murder about which he has been feeling guilty for seven years.
Right at this time, Washburn arrives there and, of course, Michael shoots him, so
Catherine manages again to remain innocent of all the crimes since she can only be
charged for using her fiction. This is the most powerful and effective weapon she can count on, and she knows it.

4. The thread/t of the spider woman

Catherine Tramell thus can be seen as the quintessential spider woman as far as she knits not only one but two parallel webs where the male victims are trapped and symbolically emasculated. The first of these two webs is mostly sexual. Catherine uses her beauty and intelligence to nullify men, who become so besotted with her that one of them, Nick, even proposes to her. The second one is textual, because Catherine is also writing a book about the men she is seducing. These two webs coalesce when Catherine lets the male victims read the drafts of her novels and they react just as Catherine has foreseen. That is how the text becomes a lethal weapon for Beth Garner and Washburn, albeit a harmless one for Catherine, who remains innocent after obtaining what she needed: death as the raw material for her thrillers.

In conclusion, what is particularly fascinating about Catherine Tramell is the way in which a postmodern femme fatale and an unusual woman writer come together to create a real spider woman who lives and kills as playfully as she writes, using her texts as a lethal weapon and challenging the gender roles of women and the genre rules of the cinematographic writers through her behaviour. She is hence the supreme female artist, as she is eager to kill for her art and only for her art.

Notes
Bibliography


Juan Senís Fernández is Associated Professor at the University of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain), where he teaches Literature and Didactics. While interested in the contemporary Spanish women writers and poetry, currently his research is mostly devoted to analyzing the representation of woman writer in films.