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Con-Artists, Valkyries, and Revenge Seekers

In the previous Chapter 3, I focused on sexual orientation and the way same-sex desire in noir is routinely problematised as a way of normalising heterosexual coupledom. My analysis also revealed how conventional nuclear family structures are valued above all else – attesting that women can relish the gains of feminism, so long as their intrinsic values reside with the preservation of familial order. This chapter continues with an exploration into the way dominant postfeminist discourse weaves its own agendas into established conventions of noir and how this in turn shapes the construction of the postmillennial spider woman.

The films examined in this chapter sit in stark contrast to each other aesthetically and narratively. They also engage with dominant postfeminist discourse in significantly different ways, highlighting its complexities. In a similar vein to Chloé, Derailed centres on the potential breakdown of the nuclear family as a result of a romantic interlude with a femme fatale, although more predictably, it is the husband who has the mid-life crisis. Like Mulholland Drive, Derailed is a postmodern blend of old and new. Evoking a mood of nostalgia for the classic era, the film is a modern retelling of Scarlet Street, but at the same time it draws on postfeminist tensions articulated in Fatal Attraction, where the husband’s infidelity endangers the traditional family and women’s choices surrounding career and home life are called into question. Sin City is closely based on a combination of four graphic novels, written and illustrated by Frank Miller: The Hard Goodbye (1991), The Customer is Always Right (1992), The Big Fat Kill (1996), and That Yellow Bastard (1997). Visually the film preserves
the comic book's stark, deeply shadowed black-and-white style, while enhancing the *noir* aesthetic with splashes of strong colour such as reds and yellows, the use of voice-over narration, and a menacing, high-tension non-diegetic sound score. The characters in *Sin City* also retain the same exaggerated, hyperbolic quality found in the comics. *Descent* on the other hand, is a gritty, realist, rape-revenge narrative, played out from the subjective position of the female victim, tracking the emotional impact of the event through to her eventual retribution.

**Tensions, contradictions, and nostalgia in *Derailed***

Advertising executive Charles Schine (Clive Owen) is married, with a daughter and a reputable career. But his relationship with his wife is strained, as is his work environment, and his child is chronically ill. One morning, on his daily commute to the office, he has a chance encounter with an alluring woman named Lucinda Harris (Jennifer Aniston), whom he quickly becomes infatuated with. Lucinda presents herself as a successful financial advisor who, just like Charles, is in an unhappy marriage with a daughter. However, she is actually a honey trap, operating as part of a criminal gang with her lover Phillip La Roche (Vincent Cassel) and a third man Dexter (played by rap artist Xibit). In a convoluted plot, Charles takes Lucinda to a seemingly random hotel for sex, but they are interrupted by La Roche who violently assaults Charles, ‘rapes’ Lucinda, and robs them both. La Roche later contacts Charles and demands 20,000 dollars. Fearing that his wife will discover his infidelity, Charles hands over the money, except that La Roche then asks for 100,000 dollars (money for Charles’s daughter’s kidney transplant operation). Desperate, Charles steals ten thousand dollars from his employer to pay an ex-convict Winston (played by rap artist RZA) to scare La Roche away. This plan goes horribly wrong when La Roche murders Winston instead. La Roche then tells Charles that he has Lucinda hostage and will kill her unless Charles hands over the money. Not realising that she is in on the scam, Charles relents. It is only later that Charles discovers the truth about Lucinda and sets out on a mission to retrieve his cash.

Stylistically, *Derailed* evokes a feel of *noir* through the frequent use of night time settings, dark streets glistening with rain, grey