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<u>The neo-noir factor of *I Know Who Killed Me*</u>

How has the genre of film noir evolved? That is the question film scholars and theorists find themselves asking constantly, as the scope of cinema has vastly changed these last eighty-five years. In a classic definition, film noir is a style of Hollywood-crime movie that generally includes black-and-white cinematography, the "hardboiled" tradition, anti-heroes, and femme fatales. The film noir genre, in this form, is considered to have peaked in the 1940's, and "died" just one decade later. Film noir emerged as a response to the trauma of World War 2, which was an ongoing conflict at the time of the genre's peak. American cynicism seemed to have become mainstream, and the film industry was not interested in shying away. Despite being produced under the Hayes Code which was intended to keep films friendly for all audiences, film noir allowed for gritty, dark circumstances – worlds which were drowning in crime, and law enforcement seemingly useless. Film noirs begged questions about human psyches and capabilities; just how far is one willing to go to get what they want? But as the war ended, attitudes shifted. Public perceptions slowly changed, as did the genre of film noir. Studios and audiences alike evolved past black-and-white stories about criminals, they progressed into worlds of color, stories of vibrancy, and contrasting narratives. Expectedly, there were still those who were not quite ready to "give up" on film noir. Thus, the concept of *neo-noir* or "new" noir was born.

Neo-noir is essentially a genre of film recognized for sharing characteristics and tropes with the classic noir genre, while also distinguishing itself through modern elements, like the use of color and contemporary narratives. Identifying neo-noir, particularly due to the modern factor, has proven to be quite difficult, and even controversial. When one of the most critically panned films of 2007, *I Know Who Killed Me,* by Chris Sivertson was released, there was not much conversation about categorizing the film as a modern noir as much as there was conversation bashing the film as a whole. Critics downright rejected any notion of taking the film seriously, instead opting to discard and discredit the efforts of the team involved with producing what I believe to be a completely misunderstood work. *I Know Who Killed Me* may be an unconventional contender for the title of neo-noir, but I believe it should certainly be considered

as one. The film aligns with the classic film noir and neo-noir elements of sexually charged and sharp female characters, the use of shadows and lighting as storytelling motifs, and themes of small-town trouble, duality of the individual, fatalism, and investigation. The articles, "Projecting Female Trauma" by Barbara Hales, "Vicious Womanhood" by Mark Jancovich, "Film Noir and the Culture of Electric Light" by Patrick Keating, and "Women in Film Noir" by Yvonne Tasker will support my thesis, along with the classic noir films *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) and *Stranger On the Third Floor* (Boris Ingster, 1940).

Mark Jancovich aims to deconstruct femininity within noir in the essay "Vicious Womanhood", providing insight for understanding how *I Know Who Killed Me* approaches hypersexuality as a threat in ways that are reminiscent of classic noir. *I Know Who Killed Me* opens with a three-minute slow-motion introduction of Lindsay Lohan's character dancing on a stripper pole on stage at a gentlemen's club of some sorts, with very intense red atmospheric lighting and some alternative music playing loudly in the background. This introduction is sultry and fervent. Audiences of the time, who were likely attracted to the film due to the star power of Lohan, would understand at this moment that this character will not be a common girl-next-door, a distinction from roles Lohan played in the past. It's a bold move to open a film with the lead character presented on stage at a strip joint, as viewers with preconceived notions about such performers may either reject or embrace a lead character of this sort. In his essay, Mark Jancovich writes how women associated with sexual display or erotic performance are often marked as societal threats. In the Golden Age of Hollywood, Jancovich elaborates, the way established actresses worked to "go against type" was to play a character that audiences were not used to, often villainous and selfish, who acted completely against the moral code that women of the time were meant to uphold: motherhood and domesticity. These characters were typically sexualized and therefore antagonistic within the story, eliciting a sense of shock amongst viewers, and shifting audience perceptions on how capable female actors could be. Nonetheless, to appease the crowds who could not stand to see a story where the only female lead is an anti-domestic villain, there was always a need for the "good girl", she who served as a *foil* to the deviant, sexual woman. In some cases, these roles were represented through twin characters – one innocent, compliant and *correct*, and one who was the opposite: vile and deceptive, another

way to showcase the range and talent of leading ladies such as Bette Davis and Olivia de Havilland (Jancovich 104).

Lindsay Lohan repeats this exact historical device in *I Know Who Killed Me*. The film was released at a tumultuous point in the actress' life, a time where her public image was rapidly declining and her professionalism was called heavily into question. Therefore, her taking on this role mimics the ambition of those who preceded her. In the film, she likewise plays a set of twins; one "good" (Aubrey Fleming, a girl from a caring family who goes missing) and one "bad" (Dakota Moss, a stripper who is rescued after being abducted and amputated, whom the other characters believe to really be an alter-ego Aubrey created as a result of trauma). Jancovich expands on how these classic Hollywood tropes manifested into the "femme fatale" characters in noir, such as Norma Desmond from *Sunset Boulevard* and Phyllis Dietrichson from *Double Indemnity*. The distinction being, that in noir films, the femme fatale must always be *punished* in some way, for audiences and studios would have rejected a "vicious" woman getting what she wants. If we view *I Know Who Killed Me* through the lens of neo-noir, we can recognize the parallels of Lohan's Dakota Moss with the femme fatale, yet with the *neo-noir twist* that is her ultimate fate. While Dakota Moss is not an ill-intended person, she does work as a sexual performer, which through the lens of a classic noir film, is unacceptable. While at first it may seem that Dakota Moss gets the "bad girl" treatment after having her hand and leg cut off by a serial killer whom she suspects targeted her after watching her perform, she does get justice for herself and her twin sister when she avenges them both by killing the man who abducted them. Her victory serves as a metaphor for the ways neo-noir takes the classical tropes of noir, and adds modern elements.

The essay "Women in Film Noir" by Yvonne Tasker provides insight that can be applied to Dakota's role as a woman in neo-noir and how the femme fatale had developed in the time between the two distinct genres. When we recognize neo-noir as a *follow-up* to classic noir, we understand how characters' motives are inspired by classic tropes, but have surely adapted to make sense in contemporary worlds. Tasker introduces and explains a new term for the neo-noir "femme fatale" by citing Jane Fonda's character in 1971's *Klute* as its model: "Her sexual openness as well as her involvement in sex work signal new attitudes quite distinct from the coded eroticism of 1940s' noir. To call her a femme fatale makes little sense…[she] is a *femme*

moderne; she exemplifies both the possibilities and the contradictions, the very real limitations of modern life" (Tasker 363). This framework certainly applies to Lohan's character in the film, down to the aspect of sexual openness. Dakota Moss is also a *femme moderne.* While Moss is a "modern" woman in a "modern" world, the world's still not quite ready for her, which is why she lacks much credibility in the eyes of those around her, and why her character signifies that *I Know Who Killed Me* can indeed be considered a neo-noir.

Furthermore, the concept of fragmentation and dual identity is built upon in Barbara Hales' "Projecting Female Trauma". The brunt of the film's narrative surrounds the mystery of whether or not Dakota Moss and Aubrey Fleming are actually the same person, or long lost twins. When Aubrey Fleming goes missing for several weeks, her family and the authorities anxiously seek answers in lieu of the news that a local serial killer has been torturing and targeting young women. One night, a disheveled "Aubrey" is discovered on the side of a road, and quickly rushed to the hospital when she appears severely wounded and dismembered. When she awakens, she does not recognize her family, insisting that she is not Aubrey, but Dakota Moss, a down-and-out stripper raised by an unsteady drug addicted mother. The FBI relays that "Dakota Moss" is an alter-ego that Aubrey has taken on as a result of intense trauma. Yet Dakota insists this isn't true, leading her family, the FBI, and the audience to question what is real and what is a projection of the imagination? Hales supports this viewpoint by writing, "Whenever a person's experience is too disturbing for the conscious mind to grasp…the individual is forced to suppress it to the unconscious register" (Hales 225). Hales writes how femme fatale's sexual nature is rooted in patriarchal violence and a rejection of male subjectivity. When we recognize Dakota as the neo-noir femme fatale, we see how her very existence aligns with this understanding. Because femme fatales reject male standards, they therefore become fragmented – there is the side of them willing and capable of conforming to patriarchal systems, and the side that completely repudiates that. If Dakota is solely the side that dejects the patriarchy, she is likewise isolated from male protection. The detectives and doctors doubt Dakota's story. They recognize Aubrey's trauma through solely viewing her as a victim, but so much so that they cannot recognize Dakota's truth. Just one member of the FBI investigation team considers the idea that Dakota and Aubrey are twins: the only woman on the whole crew. Meanwhile, the male FBI agents dismiss Dakota entirely, clearly a demonstration of Hale's point that males completely rebuff strong

women: "The splitting of the self into cold exterior and turbulent interior provided evidence of male subjectivity in crisis… The femme fatales danger exists in the 'moment of abandonment' in the sex act…sexual entity with the capacity to drain men's vital powers" (Hales 226-227). Dakota instinctively knows that none of the men around her will believe her story, which is why she is initially hostile toward the detectives and doctors who are there to support her.

The features of classic noir also echo through the film stylistically. "Film Noir and the Culture of Electric Light" by Patrick Keating assists in breaking down how the film's use of color and lighting resonates with the story's message about femininity and connects with the creative historical choices of noir. It's impossible not to notice the intense use of color in *I Know Who Killed Me*, especially the heavy strokes of blue and red. In Keating's article, he points out the extreme importance in how lighting is used in a noir to signify aspects of truth and lie, strength and power, and good vs evil. Shadows are especially keen to noir films as they were majority works of black-and-white cinematography, a feature which meant filmmakers had to work hard to showcase when something was meant to be "light" vs "dark". Keating emphasizes how the key to noir storytelling is in the lighting techniques, and how due to noir's roots as post-war storytelling, the darkness of its atmosphere mirrors these dark attitudes: "Film noir draws upon a larger iconography of artificial lighting… as a symbol of progress, the film noir critically represents the lighting technologies…thereby transforming the electricity industry's narratives of advancement into tales of inequality and alienation" (Keating 60). If we interpret the color blue in *I Know Who Killed Me* as symbolic of coldness, control, and emotional distance (used in scenes set at home, school, by doctors and FBI), and the red as symbolic of violence, pain, danger, and sexuality (used in the strip club and torture scenes), we see how these mimic the nature of classic noir. Brightness in classic noir equates to blue in *I Know Who Killed Me,* while dark shadows equate to red. It goes to show that although the film has its faults, it does not mean it isn't inspired by some means.

I Know Who Killed Me can also be recognized as neo-noir with regards to how it compares to classic noir films. Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) is often cited as the best and most famous noir film. The essence of the film is exemplified in the story of *I Know Who Killed Me.* For example, the element of both films being centered on criminal investigation. *Double Indemnity* pioneered the crime film through its twists and existential themes while following the

crime of a woman who tricks an insurance agent to kill her husband for her own financial gain. *I Know Who Killed Me* likewise follows the crime of a serial killer as he abducts and tortures young women until he is ultimately caught. Both stories are set in small towns, revolving around the danger, mystery, and fear that can occur in the most unlikely settings. *I Know Who Killed Me* also relates to another film noir, what is commonly considered the *first* noir, 1940's *Stranger On the Third Floor.* The significance of *Stranger On the Third Floor* and why it's such an important entry in the catalogue of film noir is the way it grapples with the question of *just how sure of the truth can we be?* The film's protagonist spends the entire film haunted with the question of if the testimony he gave in a murder case that sentenced someone to death was actually based on fact or his own interpretation of events. Together with his fianceé, the couple work to find the truth. Not only does *I Know Who Killed Me* touch upon that same question since everyone doubts the true identity of Aubrey/Dakota (including the viewer), they both also involve the female lead being vital in solving the mystery of the story, a matter in which the law enforcement from both films seem inadequate in solving.

 I Know Who Killed Me is a film worthy of critical and cultural re-evaluation. Sure, it may be illogical and at times, unrealistic, but it is bold and entertaining, and works to be a lot deeper than people want to believe. It's stylistically and inherently connected to elements of noir. I feel that if it were made by a more prestigious director, its candidacy as a neo-noir would be much more successful. The film mimics several historical tropes of classic noir, while also inadvertently showing how those practices may have evolved over time.

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