



**THE TRANSGRESSORS: A STUDY OF THE FEMMES FATALES
IN *FATAL ATTRACTION* AND *DISCLOSURE***

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Abstract

It is needless to say that media assumes a lion's share of world attention today, thanks to the evolution of the cyber world and digitalization. Never before has culture revolved almost exclusively on the visual, drawing assumptions and formulating attitudes based on the scopic. The expansion of visual media and narrative technology has enabled more participation in the interpretation of reality and also generated more consumers of its constructs. Cinema has come a long way since its first projection by the Lumière brothers in 1895 and burgeoned into a formidable tool for creative expression, but in the attempt to mirror reality, it also engendered archetypes and stereotypes, specifically in the portrayal of women. With much of the action deriving from the 'hero', the film was entirely his narrative and the women were the objects of his loving or lustful interest. Despite its history of over a century, it has done little except propagate images of the saintly, virtuous 'heroine' or the lustful, dangerous 'vamp' and refused to let in the real woman who is both. The article explores the depiction of the latter, the femmes fatales in the films **Fatal Attraction** and **Disclosure** to unearth their untold stories.

Key words: archetype, femme fatale, misrepresentation, power, sexuality.

Introduction

Over the years, the world has stood witness to the silent but persistent growth of Visual Culture, which has made 'seeing' or 'gazing' the fulcrum of most human experiences and learning. Art, architecture, cinema, television, advertisements, internet, video games and so on generate visual narratives that determine our perception of reality and often even go to the extent of constructing it. The consequence is that, ranging from the high profile politician, the media professional, the director, and the creative artist to the movie buff, the twitterati, the stay-at-





home mother and the daily wages worker, everyone is part of the system that creates and consumes visual signifiers in the poststructuralist era. Nicholas Mirzoeff in his essay, “The Subject of Visual Culture,” that serves as an introduction to his edited volume *The Visual Culture Reader*, traces the evolution of discourse from “I think, therefore I am” to the post-Cartesian philosophy – “I am seen and I see that I am seen” (Beller). This shift from a verbal/textual culture into the theatre of ‘visuality’ is primarily due to the revolution in image technology. A study of visual narratology reveals how the interface between the image and observer generates meaning and organizes our perception of race, class, nation, gender and sexuality.

Woman as Object of Scopophilia

Cinema has skilfully modulated the insatiable desire of the human psyche to ‘see’ and derive visual pleasure. In the process of satisfying this ‘scopophilia’, it has also constructed the paradigm of gender relations and sexuality, often resulting in misrepresenting and damaging the image of the female. In her influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Laura Mulvey analyzes the exclusion of female subjectivity in Hollywood films and exposes its augmentation of patriarchal domination by appeasing the male ego. It is the male gaze which the narrative caters to, as the camera follows the optical and libidinal perspective of the male characters and hence, the spectator identifies with it. Consequently, the female becomes the object of the gaze and her existence in the frame is defined as ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ according to Mulvey. The exclusion of female subjectivity and her rejection as a concrete individual in the scopic narratives makes her a mere receptacle: “Woman ... stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey 15).

The Archetype of the *Femme fatale*

The perpetuation of stereotypes and myths about femininity and women through films has been analyzed using both semiotics and psychoanalysis. Mulvey identifies the gendered binary opposition of the active/passive that is played out in films featuring a virile, sprightly masculine figure as opposed to a demure, compliant feminine figure that only intensifies patriarchal domination and exploitation of women. On the contrary, films, especially those belonging to genre of the classic Hollywood *film noir* began the trend of representing women as intensely sexual and thus deadly. They were lovingly called the *femmes fatales* and they came to embody the masculine fear of female sexuality. Such representations were therefore, indicted by second wave feminists as negative, oppressive and generating misogyny.





The *film noir* is representative of the times in which it flourished on the celluloid – the 1940s and '50s, or roughly the post World War period and was heavily influenced by Expressionist cinematography. It had staple elements like dim back-and-white visuals, the private eye, the world of crime and eroticism, convoluted time and non-linear narratives, and of course the archetype of the *femme fatale*. The counterpart of mythology and legend, the *femme fatale* (translated from French as “fatal woman”) is bewitchingly beautiful and moreover, is aware of her charms. She unleashes the power of her sexuality and lures her male victim to his doom. Hellenic figures like Clytemnestra, Medea, and Aphrodite, the Biblical Salome and Delilah, the Hindu instances of Draupadi and Mohini find resonance in many Sirens recreated onscreen.

The *femme fatale* is essentially one who places herself outside the purview of patriarchal structures like marriage and motherhood. She flaunts her exquisite curves, wearing flashy outfits with plunging necklines and generously lavishes her attention upon a prospective male victim. Her presence on the screen arouses erotic, voyeuristic pleasure in the spectator and thus augments the male gaze. She places no onus upon herself to safeguard her chastity and thus flouts the conventions of the society she inhabits. But in doing so, she tempts the men around her to compromise their integrity as well (but, that is excusable for men will be men). The urbanity of the *femme fatale* also makes her convincing. Her exposure to sophistication and education has helped her evade conditioning by virtue of which she refuses to play the prescribed roles of devoted wife and doting mother. Fiercely, she seeks out her independence and lives life exclusively on her own terms. But in the process, she does not flinch from murder, conspiracy and double-cross. The consequence is the arousal of repulsion and hatred encouraging the spectator to wish evil upon the transgressor. And this ‘poetic justice’ is enacted out by the *film noir* with the death or punishment of the *femme fatale* or, in other instances, her transformation to traditional womanhood.

Fatal Attraction: What about the Story of Alex Forrest?

The *neo noir* films of the later decades sustained the image of the *femme fatale*. She is still dangerously beautiful, a head-turner and embraces sexual independence but, now she is also the career woman – the working, successful, yet single girl. Directed by Adrian Lyne and released in 1987, *Fatal Attraction* revolves around the consequences of a one-night-stand gone wrong. Starring Glenn Close (Alexandra Forrest), Michael Douglas (Dan Gallagher) and Anne Archer (Beth Gallagher), it went on to be the second highest grossing film of the year in the US and earned six Academy Award nominations.

When Dan, a happily married lawyer engages in a weekend fling with Alex who is an equally successful and independent professional, he has no intention of taking it beyond the bed. But





things turn on their head when Alex demands commitment and ownership of responsibility and infiltrates menacingly into Dan's family space. What follows is a spree of vengeance and violence initiated by the jilted and now, psychotic *femme fatale* and the spectator screaming for her blood. After all, she has no place within the sanctity of the family because she has chosen career and power. Alex therefore, becomes the quintessential blood-thirsty vampire, the crazed murderer that must be destroyed. The film even contributed the phrase "bunny-boiler" to the dictionary which depicts obsessive vengefulness.

Alex Forrest is a compelling, arresting woman who holds your gaze the minute she features on the screen. Dan fails to resist her charms and sexiness not only since she is alluring herself, but also since she presents a stark foil to Beth, Dan's saintly but tame wife. The city siren embodies the exotic 'Other', who fascinates but should be carefully kept outside the mainstream. Dan has no qualms about morality or fidelity when he succumbs to his basic instincts, but forthrightly makes a 'no-strings-attached' pact with Alex. The narrative of *Fatal Attraction* eventually uses this as a ploy to defend Dan Gallagher's actions – Alex knew the rules of the game, she should have played fair. Though both transgress the fine line between attraction and seduction, it ironically proves fatal for Alex alone, contrary to what the film tries to impress. Dan is forgiven by love and law, while Alex pays with her life.

However, the film which ends with Beth shooting Alex dead was originally intended to narrate a different story. In the original ending of the film, after Dan violently encounters Alex in her apartment to threaten her against intruding into his family, Alex is found dead with a slit to her throat. The kitchen knife recovered from the scene has Dan's fingerprints on it, leading to his arrest. But, Beth discovers a recorded tape in which Alex threatens to take her own life if she is rejected by Dan. The evidence is enough to acquit Dan and he re-joins his family. The final scene flashes back to Alex's apartment, where the notes of *Madame Butterfly* float in the air as she cuts her throat, now clearly cast as a victim. This redemption of the 'wronged woman' was sacrificed in favour of the more gratifying destruction of the female transgressor that would appease the conservative viewers by turning her into a vicious, perilous lunatic gunned down by the tormented wife. The makers got a hint of their attitude when the test audience wildly cheered Beth as she spoke to Alex over the telephone, "This is Beth Gallagher. If you ever come near my family again, I'll kill you." The popular psyche could not so much as sympathize with the 'Other woman' and wanted a resolution that would restore family order by permanently ousting her. Despite the protestations of Close and the script writer James Dearden, the actual ending was altered to what we see today.





The film does suggest that had Dan taken up responsibility for his actions, the damage could have been controlled. Disappointingly, this aspect is not discussed but rather hushed up. What the narrative also fails to acknowledge and explore is the backstory of Alex and her borderline personality disorder which must have deep-set roots in a disturbing incident or memory. But this is conveniently glossed over since the film follows the gaze and perspective of Dan, and since these issues do not matter to him, they are not worthy of inclusion. Despite being the successful editor of a leading publishing house, her confident exterior is apparently a façade that masks her anxieties and loneliness. She has no friends. And that is the price you pay for getting to the top – the female victor stands all alone.

Disclosure: Is Meredith Johnson the Corporate Witch?

Quite similar to *Fatal Attraction* though nuanced differently, *Disclosure* that hit the screen in 1994 was an adaptation of Michael Crichton's novel directed by Barry Levinson and had Demi Moore (Meredith Johnson) and Michael Douglas (Tom Sanders) in lead roles. Set predominantly in the workspace rather than the domestic *mise en scène*, the plot explores the relationship between gender and power as much as the aftermath of spurning the sexual advances of a superior. Winding its way through intricate corporate manipulations and politics, the film debates the definition of sexual harassment at work. The difference is, tables are turned and it's the *femme fatale* who calls the shots and designs the game.

Tension begins with the introduction of the suave Meredith Johnson, the newly promoted Vice President of DigiCom who is evidently (sexually) aggressive and a seasoned player. But almost immediately, her success is attributed to her flexible morals rather than intellect or capabilities and hence, she is clearly unfit for the job. Tom remarks: "This is a technical division; she doesn't know the difference between a software and a cashmere sweater." While Tom bottles up the brewing discontent of losing his promotion to a woman (incidentally his ex-girlfriend), trouble escalates when he rejects her amorous advances. Surprisingly, it's the woman who takes charge and launches a sexual assault on the man – that's relatively unheard of. But Tom does get aroused and carried away as he reciprocates, but eventually rebuffs her. Frenzied and blinded by rage, Meredith goes all-out to strip Tom of his career and honour by lodging a case of sexual harassment against him.

It is Meredith's appropriation of power and control of the game that terrorizes Tom and generates in him the psychological fear of castration. Susan Bordo opines in *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.* that when women like Meredith





[...] challenge implicit ownership, claim the right to share the power to define and control the rules of the game, sexual and otherwise, men feel baffled and uncertain about the new rules. They may also feel threatened by a loss of manhood (Strickland).

The only way to restore his dignity and respect is by destroying Meredith legally and professionally. What is interesting to note, is the seemingly non-existent role of the wife who after initial suspicion seems to trust Tom. Meredith's exposé by Tom through a recording of their encounter leaves her fuming and confessing:

I am a sexually aggressive woman and I like it. Tom knew it and you can't handle it. It is the same damn thing since the beginning of time. Veil it, hide it, lock it, throw away the key. We expect a woman to do a man's job and make a man's money and then walk around with a parasol and lie down for a man to fuck her like it was 100 years ago.

She questions the static norms of the society and paranoia of female sexual desires but by then, things have spiralled out of her control.

It goes on to prove that power wielded by women in positions of authority is lethal. The film also subtly suggests that cases of rape and sexual molestation seem to be inherently biased in favour of the female victim and renders the accused male at a disadvantage. By extension, one can argue that a subliminal message is veiled within – what if the woman asked for it?; what if her 'no' was an implied 'yes'? Just like a man would pry deep for the 'yes' in a woman's 'no', Meredith also reads Tom's 'no' as a 'yes' especially when he responds to her passion.

On the surface, the film apparently deserves credit for showcasing a fearless, shrewd and dynamic woman in the corporate circle but this also proves to be a farce. Meredith's confession that she was acting out the master plan of the founder president of DigiCom Bob Garvin (Donald Sutherland) to evict Tom, serves as the anti-climax to those excited by the prowess of her character. She was only the bait to ensnare, and never held the line. It was an all-men's game after all. But even as Meredith walks out, she is not wholly defeated, at least going by her assertion of receiving job offers from the top brass. And even Tom is not the absolute victor, for Meredith is succeeded not by him but yet another hitherto side-lined female figure in the company, Stephanie Kaplan (Rosemary Forsyth).

Conclusion





Both *Fatal Attraction* and *Disclosure* were indicted by feminists for sending negative signals about career-oriented women as sex-crazed and demented for power. Since they have rejected the 'security' and 'sanctorum' of family, derision and defeat is their ultimate share. Power and passion are fatal to a woman and will therefore be punished.

Although feminism regarded the *femme fatale* as loaded with negativity and cannibalism inherent in the female body, it can also be looked upon as an enactment of power. It is not the defeated, punished or even deceased figure that lingers. On the contrary, the defiance, rebellion and power wielded by the enchantress excite the spectators much beyond the ending. Her ability to hold the gaze of the characters, spectators and the camera with her indulgence of sexuality and pleasure enable her to transcend the status quo. Despite the intention of the film to restrain and convert her or present her as an undesirable element, she refuses to be taken out without a fight. It is this confidence and power that encourage identification with the *femme fatale* as subject rather than object of desire. As Bordo states, "Women are not angels and men are not devils, and both are capable of abuse of power" (Strickland).

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