

# THEY KILL FOR LOVE

## Defining the Erotic Thriller as a Film Genre

Within the last decade or so, a number of films have appeared in which desire and death interpenetrate, as is often indicated by two-word titles linking a sexy adjective with a deadly noun, or vice versa: *Bodily Harm*, *Carnal Crimes*, *Dangerous Indiscretion*, *Mortal Passions*, *Obsessive Love*, *Sexual Malice*, and so on. These films' taglines, used for newspaper ads, movie posters, film trailers, and video boxes, also tell the same story of potentially lethal love: "Sex. Greed. Power. Murder;" "Flesh seduces. Passion kills;" "In the heat of desire love can turn to deception;" "There's a fine line between passion and pain;" and, with connect-the-dots explicitness, "Red hot passion. Cold-blooded murder. One thing leads to another." When these kinds of films first started appearing in the late eighties, they were often dismissed by critics as mere imitations designed to cash in on the surprising success of *Fatal Attraction* (1987). But it soon became clear that something more important was happening, as the number of low-budget films of this type began to grow exponentially, and as Hollywood began to produce a series of A-list films in this category, many featuring major stars: *Sea of Love* (1989; Al Pacino, Ellen Barkin), *Consenting Adults* (1992; Kevin Kline, Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), *Final Analysis* (1992; Richard Gere, Kim Basinger), *Body of Evidence* (1993; Madonna, Willem Dafoe), *Color of Night* (1994; Bruce Willis), and *Never Talk to Strangers* (1995; Rebecca DeMornay, Antonio Banderas). If *Fatal Attraction* started the trend, the even-more-controversial *Basic Instinct* (1992) solidified it, and the fact that Carl Reiner named his spoof *Fatal Instinct* (1993) after these films is strong indication that a new genre exists and that these two films can be taken as paradigmatic of it. Another sign that these kinds of films have achieved genre status is that Stanley Kubrick, who with each film seemed to put his imprimatur on a different genre, released in 1999 a film that, whatever its actual type, was at least marketed as an erotic thriller—*Eyes Wide Shut*, starring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. Finally, unlike the term "film noir," which was not used by makers or marketers of the forties' and fifties' films to which French critics later attached the label, "erotic thriller" has been in widespread use by directors, audiences, and reviewers since the early nineties. If it is a marketing gimmick exploited by advertisers, it is also a generally recognized new category for films.<sup>1</sup>

The word "new," of course, is relative. The genre didn't spring from nowhere, and one can see its roots and affiliations in the categories critics used for these films in the late eighties before "erotic thriller" became common parlance: film noir, mystery, horror, melodrama, and pornography. A hybrid form (as even its title indicates), the erotic thriller combines traditional generic elements into a new mix. If it owes much to previous genres (sometimes to the point of being mistaken for them), it also presents an innovative conjunction of prior generic strands in a form that is specific to contemporary

<sup>1</sup> Some video stores even have a separate section for "erotic thrillers."

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social issues. As the erotic thriller extends generic lines in new directions and intertwines formerly separate strands, it does so in response to changing social concerns. Generic transformation and social change are interrelated, and the birth of a new genre from older forms is a social-historical event as much as it is a moment in film-aesthetic history. In this essay, I shall consider the form and ideology of the erotic thriller in relation to those of pornography, mystery, and horror, leaving discussion of the links to melodrama and film noir for another time.

### Pornography

The erotic thriller's strong link to pornography is certainly one reason for its popular success—and probably one reason for its critical neglect as a genre. Porn is usually decried by mainstream reviewers and, until recently, by film scholars, who have traditionally seen their role as attempting to elevate the popular taste above base pleasures. Hollywood films and pornography have actually been on converging paths for several decades, as Hollywood made its love scenes steamier and steamier, first to differentiate its product from TV's tameness (the fifties and sixties), then to challenge the competition provided by porn films like *Deep Throat* (the seventies), and finally to combat the new popularity of cable and video porn (the eighties and nineties). The appearance of the erotic thriller as a genre is concurrent with that of video porn, and the two are closely related: both genres feature sex scenes occurring at regular intervals, and in low-budget erotic thrillers the plot, as in porn, may be mainly a pretext for the sex. As Linda Ruth Williams notes, erotic thrillers "operate with a constant awareness of masturbation as a prime audience response and index of the film's success,"<sup>2</sup> particularly when viewed on home video. Viewers' interest in seeing ever-more explicit sex can be variously explained as the logical consequence of Hollywood's always upping the ante, creating and feeding an appetite for greater sensationalism; as a reaction against the Reagan-Bush era's conservative propaganda promoting "family values"; or as a visual compensation for a reduction in casual or promiscuous sex due to the threat of AIDS.

It should be noted, however, that erotic thrillers also define themselves by the distance they keep from porn. While low-budget, direct-to-video, unrated erotic thrillers are virtually synonymous with porn, Hollywood's A-list thrillers are rated R and play in respectable theaters. When these go to video, they are usually still rentable in the R-rated version, as well as in unrated or "director's cut" versions for sex aficionados. Granted, R-rated erotic thrillers could be described as Hollywood's compromise between the censor's demand for public respectability and the consumer's desire for sexual adventure, and bourgeois patrons could be said to attend such thrillers as an alibi for their interest in pornography. But there is more to the difference between erotic thrillers and porn: the line these thrillers walk between soft- and hardcore sex scenes is an important part of the thrill drawing audiences to see them.

The exposure of the body in an erotic thriller, though expected, is not routine, as in pornography; instead, it always involves the transgression of limits. Whether this transgression is to be read as ideologically progressive or reactionary is a point as crucial as it is contestable. Consider the notorious "beaver shot"

from *Basic Instinct*, in which Catherine/Sharon Stone crosses and uncrosses her legs, exposing herself to police officers during an interrogation. As the camera positions us to share the policemen's investigative gaze up Catherine's dress, we participate in the violation of her private parts—a sexist thrill. But is this scene one of eye-rape, or does Catherine use exhibitionism as a counterattack against the men invading her privacy by interrogating her? Robert Battistini refers to her "thoroughly unashamed and purposeful revelation of her (now menacing) vulva,"<sup>3</sup> and Robert E. Wood notes that her "conspicuous absence of undergarments disconcerts a battery of police interrogators: they and not the suspect are made to sweat. More significantly, they become the object of the gaze as camera and audience are aligned with Catherine to consider the interrogators as objects of aggression."<sup>4</sup> Thus their fear of female sexuality is turned back upon the men, as Catherine deliberately displays herself as the castrating sight/site of their dread.<sup>5</sup> But, on another level (as many viewers now know), the display was not deliberate: as Sharon Stone has indicated in numerous interviews, director Paul Verhoeven had sworn to her prior to the shooting of this scene that her pubic hair would not be visible on camera. Yet, in violation of her wishes, it was—and still is, in freeze-framed videos and video scans exhibited on the World Wide Web. Whether the scene is viewed as a male sexist fantasy or a feminist critique ultimately depends on the viewer's predisposition. The scene itself, like so many in erotic thrillers, is open to widely divergent ideological readings, as Hollywood continues its lucrative practice of appealing to the broadest possible audience.

It is probably because of the ideological ambiguity of such scenes that Stone, a feminist who made her fame as an actress in *Basic Instinct*, has said that "in this business there is plan A, in which you become successful by living and acting with a lot of integrity. Then there's plan B, where you sell your soul to the devil. I still find it hard to distinguish one from the other."<sup>6</sup> Another actress, Chloe Channing, while auditioning for a part in an erotic thriller—increasingly, one of the few kinds of roles available to aspiring young actresses—was reminded of Sharon Stone: "after slogging through a series of dull, undistinguished roles in a series of dull, undistinguished movies, Stone had been catapulted by *Basic Instinct* into movie-star heaven. Now she was thought of as the fuck of the century. Suddenly, I felt depressed; I longed for the days when women like Katharine Hepburn became big stars because of their wit, their intelligence, their comedic timing, and their guts."<sup>7</sup> Instructed by the director to find some novel (sexual) way to "offend" him (expose herself?), Channing says, "I found myself overwhelmed with rage. The audition had seemed so unfair, so demeaning, so . . . so . . . offensive!"<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the meaning of the "beaver shot" scene in *Basic Instinct*, it is worth noting that Stone's co-star, Michael Douglas, who appears with her in several sex scenes, had a "clause in [his] contract specifying that his penis could never be shown on screen."<sup>9</sup> The erotic thriller's transgression of limits involves only the female body, not the male. The penis is not exposed but remains veiled, the better to preserve its myth of phallic power. Even though Phillip Noyce, the director of Stone's next erotic thriller, *Sliver* (1993), vowed that "it wouldn't be another



film on a long list of movies that exploited the female image," noting "how prominently [co-star William] Baldwin's penis would be featured,"<sup>10</sup> nevertheless, shots of the male organ were removed in order to achieve an R rating, whereas Stone is watched by Baldwin through a hidden video camera while she masturbates in the bath. Her feminist challenge to his male voyeurism at the movie's end—she tells him to "get a life!"—is probably too little and too late to offset the sexist gaze he and we have indulged in throughout the film—but at least the challenge is posed.

Thus, the viewer of an erotic thriller may initially be positioned as porn's prototypical voyeur, masturbating in his mastery over the female body, but, unlike in porn, this dominance is usually challenged, either weakly (as in Stone's verbal retort to Baldwin) or more strongly (as in her aggressive exhibitionism directed at her interrogators in *Basic Instinct*). Similarly, whereas porn presents heterosexual intercourse as the male conquest of women, erotic thrillers question this attitude and outcome. The sex scenes in both genres move through the usual stages of foreplay, but while the porn narrative culminates in the "cum shot"—visible proof of virility—the erotic thriller takes the man through kissing, fondling, fellatio, and fucking only to climax in his murder (or the threat thereof). In *Body of Evidence*, Madonna is accused of having fucked an older man to death; a character describes her body as "no different from a gun or a knife." In *Fatal Attraction*, the rough sex by which Dan/Michael Douglas proves his masculinity with Alex/Glenn Close is later restaged with "the same kitchen setting, the same intertwining choreography, even the same panting soundtrack" as Alex attacks him with a knife. As James Conlon notes, the point of the likeness is that "Passion leads inevitably to murder; it cannot be extricated from death."<sup>11</sup> And *Basic Instinct* begins with a sex scene that climaxes in the man's death by ice pick ("He got off before he got off"); the two subsequent scenes of intercourse between Nick/Michael Douglas and Catherine/Sharon Stone are staged in exactly the same way, with Nick fearing the same outcome.

It is as if the pornographic fantasy of conquering women were haunted by guilt over the fact that such dominance amounts to rape and deserves rape in return—the woman's penetration of the man by gun bullets, knife, or ice pick. (Interestingly, Nick's partner [Gus/George Dzundza] speculates that Nick is fucking Catherine because he wants to die due to guilt over his having shot some innocent bystanders in an earlier scene: does Nick's death wish represent his unconscious realization that his macho gunplay—and cocksmanhood—must come to an end? His nickname is "Shooter.") In *Fatal Attraction*, Alex's coming at Dan with a knife could be seen as Dan's nightmare of punishment for having abandoned her after using her for his own pleasure and making her pregnant ("You thought you could just walk into my life and turn it upside-down without a thought for anyone but yourself"; "I won't allow you to treat me like some slut you can just bang a couple of times and throw in the garbage."). The phallic women of these erotic thrillers may be a sign that the feminist critique of porn is taking hold of the patriarchal fantasy apparatus. Rather than lying back and taking it, women are fighting back in erotic thrillers, wielding the male weapon against

men in the very heart of the masculine imaginary.

Certainly, feminist viewers—male and female—have expressed admiration for the phallic women in erotic thrillers, but a case could be made for their fitting the old sexist stereotype of the castrating bitch whom it's a thrill to ride and survive. As Lynda Hart puts it, "If men need femininity to be associated with death, they also need representations in which masculinity survives the thrill of getting close to those flames."<sup>12</sup> To Nick, Catherine is "the fuck of the century" because she makes him afraid he will die beyond the little death of orgasm: "That's what made it so good." For women to be considered the equivalent of autoerotic self-strangulation is hardly flattering. The bondage and discipline exercised by women on men in erotic thrillers goes beyond porn's kinky excitements to reach a whole new level of potentially lethal thrills, as parodied in *Fatal Instinct's* "Kamikaze Kama Sutra—Encyclopedia of Dangerous Sexual Positions." Erotic thrillers depict male masochistic fantasies in which gender role reversals are taken as far as they can go: in *Basic Instinct*, the sexual scenario puts woman on top, man tied to the bed by her scarf and—unless he wins her over in time—penetrated with her ice pick. At the end of the film, Catherine, who has reached for the ice pick, embraces Nick instead. In *Fatal Attraction's* struggle over the knife, Dan disarms Alex, not winning her over but winning out over her. An unpleasantly familiar element of Oedipal rivalry enters these films wherein the male protagonist proves that, unlike the (often older) men who have died trying, he can fuck without being fucked—as Willem Dafoe attempts to survive his trysts with Madonna's murderous *Body of Evidence*, and as Nick escapes the ice-picked fate of the man in *Basic Instinct's* opening scene.<sup>13</sup>

2 Linda Ruth Williams, "Erotic Thrillers and Rude Women," *Sight and Sound* 3.7 (July 1993), 12.

3 Robert Battistini, "Basic Instinct: Revisionist Hard-On, Hollywood Trash, or Feminist Hope?" *Cinefocus* 2.2 (Spring 1992), 39.

4 Robert E. Wood, "Somebody Has to Die: Basic Instinct as White Noir," *Post Script* 12.3 (Summer 1993), 47.

5 Like pornography, the erotic thriller reduces the female body to sexual parts. However, as in the "beaver shot" from *Basic Instinct*, these parts are often more castrating than welcoming, unlike the wide-open women of porn. In the erotic thriller, the vagina's ability to "stare back" at the phallic eye gives this genre more feminist potential than is usually offered by porn's passive, appropriable female body.

6 Sharon Stone, qtd. in John Walker, ed., *Halliwel's Filmgoer's and Video Viewer's Companion*, 11th ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 574.

7 Chloe Channing, "Offensive Behavior," *Buzz* (July-Aug. 1992), 38.

8 Channing, 91.

9 Amy Taubin, "The Boys Who Cried Misogyny," *Village Voice* (28 April 1992), 36.

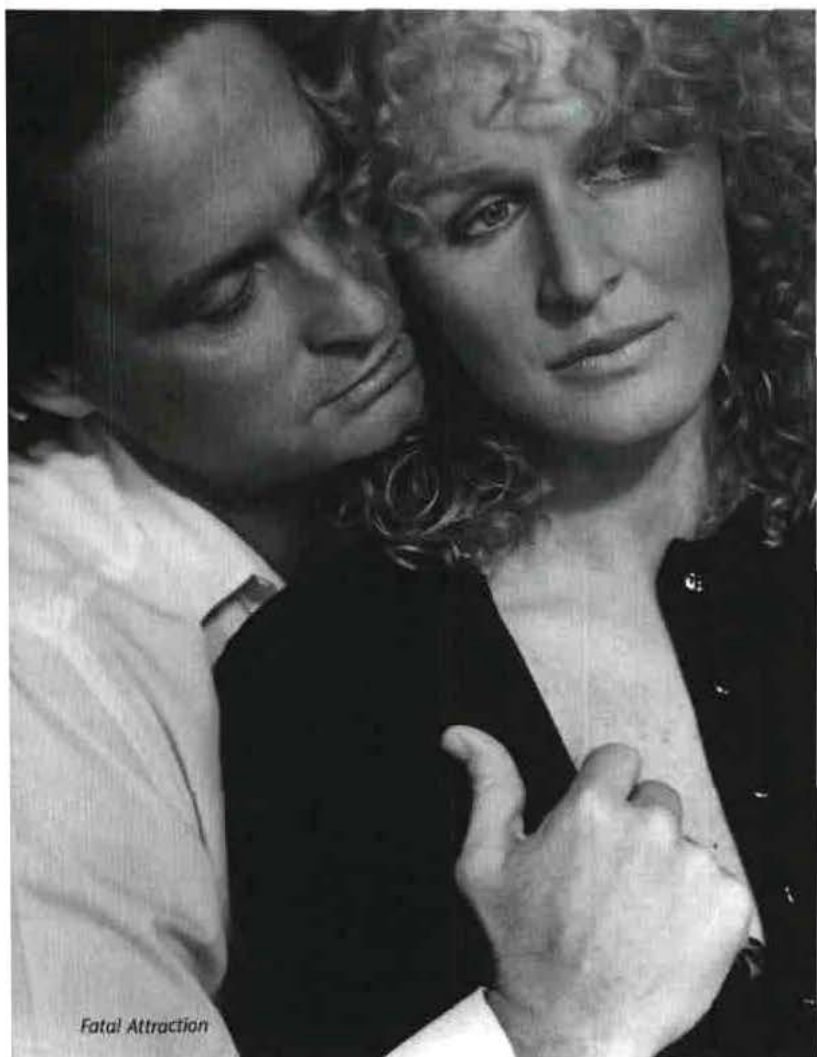
10 *Spy* (June 1993), 34.

11 James Conlon, "The Place of Passion: Reflections on *Fatal Attraction*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 16.4 (Winter 1989), 153.

12 Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 133.

13 Paul Verhoeven's *The Fourth Man* (Dutch, 1984) makes unusually explicit what is often only hinted at in Hollywood's erotic thrillers: the male protagonist braves the woman's deadly desire as a way of gaining a leg up on homosocial power relations. The writer in this film exposes himself to the sexual threat posed by the woman only so that he can remain in the company of her boyfriend. Nickolas Pappas makes a similar argument about the man (Al Pacino), the woman (Ellen Barkin), and her ex-husband (Michael Rooker) in *Sea of Love* (1989). See Pappas, "Failures of Marriage in *Sea of Love* (The Love of Men, the Respect of Women)," in Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas E. Wartenberg, eds., *Philosophy and Film* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 109-25.





Fatal Attraction

A final difference-within-similarity between porn and erotic thrillers can be found in their depictions of "lesbian love scenes". Both genres present sex between women. In porn, such scenes are clearly masturbated by the male voyeur and are not about female agency; the women perform for his pleasure, not their own. By their seeming self-sufficiency exclusive of the male, they challenge him to enter the scene and prove that only a man will do—and he may even imagine doing them both, in a *ménage à trois*. In *Basic Instinct*, the sensual dance between Catherine and her girlfriend Roxy seems offered as foreplay to Nick, who later feels that he has successfully taken Roxy's place in bed with Catherine. As Yvonne Tasker notes, Nick seems to believe that he has "'cured' [Catherine] of her lesbianism, . . . as he brags about his sexual performance to Catherine's girlfriend."<sup>14</sup> But, in the erotic thriller, male prowess in bed does not simply displace some "naturally inferior" lesbianism: Roxy's desire for Catherine is serious and determined—she tries to run Nick over with a car before crashing—and Catherine cries real tears at her death (she was dry-eyed at the demise of her *male* lover). Even as Nick may feel his manhood solidified by Catherine's choosing to embrace his sex at the end, she did reach for that ice pick, which remains—in the film's last shot—under her bed.

Once again, the erotic thriller suggests disturbances in porn's

masculinist imaginary. The effect of lesbian activism and Queer Nation during the eighties and nineties has been to make female-female desire and bisexuality harder for men to dismiss as mere stages on the road to heterosexuality. The idea that a woman might choose a woman or choose not to choose—the idea that a woman has a choice and the agency to make it—is both enticing (surely this is part of Catherine's appeal for Nick) and frightening, for it means an end to the male fantasy of total control. As a projection of male fears, the women in *Basic Instinct* are demonized in the way that lesbians often are, depicted as autoerotic-narcissistic "mirrors" of one another (they're all icy blondes indifferent to men), as "mothers" to each other (they ignore the man-boy so desperate for attention), and as "men" (anyone with agency, desire for women, and an ice pick must "really" be a man).<sup>15</sup> Near the end of the film, thinking that his own former girlfriend Beth has slept with Catherine and is about to pull a gun out of her pocket, Nick shoots her after having said, "Still like girls, Beth?" The phallic women Beth and Roxy must be destroyed so that Catherine can take her rightful place at Nick's side (like Eve made from Adam's rib).

### Mystery

If porn can be said to involve an investigation into female sexuality in which woman is eventually pinned down as the opposite sex, and if mysteries involve murder investigations wherein disguises are penetrated and the killer's weakness exposed, then the erotic thriller can be said to combine the two genres: in a telling double entendre, Nick says his goal is to "nail" whichever blonde has been wielding the ice pick. Whether he shoots her with his gun (Beth) or his penis (Catherine), Nick's aim is to disarm the phallic woman and reform her as the hole or lack complementing his potency. However, whereas the private eye or dick in a mystery makes confident use of his superior knowledge to identify and eliminate the culprit and restore the patriarchal order, the male protagonist in an erotic thriller rarely reaches such an omniscient or omnipotent conclusion. After killing his girlfriend Beth in the certain conviction that she is the killer, Nick beds Catherine, but we see an ice pick under her bed. Did Beth put it there to frame Catherine, or was it Catherine who had earlier framed Beth? On the "director's cut" video of *Basic Instinct*, Verhoeven seems conclusive in his statement that the end of the film reveals the solution to the mystery: Catherine did it. But then he instills doubt by pointing out that the ice pick under Catherine's bed is a steel one she had used earlier in the film to break ice, whereas the pick we have seen the killer use to murder men was made of wood. Rather than consummating his phallic mastery over Catherine, Nick is left in a state of macho-narcissistic ignorance: he thinks he has nailed her, but she could potentially reach for that ice pick at any time and nail him.

Judging *Basic Instinct* by the standards of a good mystery, Richard Schickel complains that it does not measure up because it breaks "faith with the most inviolate convention of the whodunit—refusing to state firmly which of the two women dunit."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Roger Ebert objects to the film's departure from the sound structural principles of a mystery, whereby red herrings are eventually realized as such and the hero's (and audi-





ence(s) detective work narrows down the clues to point to the one inevitably guilty party: "What bothers me is that the whole plot has been constructed so that every relevant clue can be read two ways. That means the solution, when it is finally revealed, is not necessarily true."<sup>17</sup> Yet erotic thrillers are not failed mysteries, but a different—though related—genre. It is interesting that Verhoeven describes *Basic Instinct* as "a sadomasochistic murder mystery", implying not only that Nick gets a sexual charge out of his power struggle with the women (does he enjoy being a masochist up to a point? the point of death?), but also that the question of who ends up dominant and who submissive may be a bit more confused than in the traditional mystery, where the detective rarely has sex—let alone S/M sex—with the suspect.<sup>18</sup>

The confused endings of erotic thrillers reflect and intervene in ideological conflicts pertaining to today's social issues, which have changed from those of the past. It is Nick's statement (borrowed from another male cop) about wanting to "fuck like minks, raise rug rats, and live happily ever after" that prompts Catherine to reach for the ice pick under the bed, and it is his willingness to accept her wish not to have children that leads her to leave the ice pick there and embrace him. Does the movie here promote through Nick some recent male understanding

that not every woman wants to be a mother and that some women might well get angry at the assumption that they do, or is Catherine's potentially murderous aversion to children a sign of dysfunction (she's too sexually active, too mannish, too lesbian)? Is her not wanting children really just Nick's fantasy of sex without any strings attached, or is this a progressive ideal shared by both men and women, as when Catherine earlier claims the same right as men to enjoy sex without love or emotional attachment? If sadomasochistic sex is the erotic thriller's exploration of gender role reversal and deconstruction of opposites, then the film's ambiguous ending figures the male's continuing ambivalence regarding what a woman wants and what he wants in a woman.

As to the irresolution about whodunit, this can certainly be taken in the reactionary sense as a sign of male fears run ram-

14 Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 140.

15 Chris Holmlund, "Cruisin' for a Bruisin': Hollywood's Deadly (Lesbian) Dolls," *Cinema Journal* 34.1 (Fall 1994), 36-37.

16 Richard Schickel, "Lots of Skin, but No Heart," *Time* (23 March 1992), 65.

17 Roger Ebert, *Roger Ebert's Video Companion*, 1994 ed. (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1993), 54.

18 Paul Verhoeven, qtd. in Nicholas Pasquariello, "Primal Urges Propel *Basic Instinct*," *American Cinematographer* 73.4 (April 1992), 44.





pant. The fact that any of the icy blondes in the film could have committed the murders goes beyond the mystery genre's requirement that there be the greatest possible number of suspects, because none is really ruled out in the end. Instead, since any one of the women could be guilty (and several have confessed to having murdered before), and since they all seem to know each other intimately, the implication is that they may have "done it" together: had lesbian sex, murdered men—it amounts to the same thing, from a paranoid male perspective. Thus the film's inconclusiveness could be said to figure a pervasive lesbiphobia. Chris Fowler, executive director of GLAAD Los Angeles, argued that *Basic Instinct* is "based on a stereotype that lesbians hate men. The fact they are lesbians defines their hatred of men, which then lends itself to their murdering of men. This is, in fact, defamatory."<sup>19</sup> Gay activists protested at theaters showing the film, where they "blew whistles, passed out leaflets, and carried such placards as 'Kiss My Ice Pick,' 'Hollywood Promotes Anti-Gay Violence,' and 'Save Your Money—The Bisexual Did It.'"<sup>20</sup> The "Catherine Did It!" campaign to spoil the mystery by revealing the ending of the film represents an attempt to challenge audience indoctrination by the mystery formula into unthinking hatred of bisexuality or lesbianism as

guilty *per se*: "If the viewer knows what the ending is, the manipulation of the viewer is eliminated," as Phyllis Burke rather optimistically put it.<sup>21</sup> The ambiguity of the film's ending could provoke a similar critical distance from knee-jerk "blame the lesbian" responses, but it may also be taken as promoting a generalized distrust of all women as potential lesbian man-haters.

The "Kiss My Ice Pick" strategy was adopted by other feminists and gay activists as an attempt to throw gynophobic stereotypes back in men's faces (reverse discourse, or dismantling the master's house with the master's tools). It is in this spirit that Paula Graham asks, "What could be wrong with a film in which women sleep with each other and kill men?"<sup>22</sup> and Ruth Picardie says, "a dyke with two Ferraris who kills men? Now that's a positive image!"<sup>23</sup> These are not merely resistant readings or readings against the grain, for the ambivalence surrounding the "dangerous woman" in erotic thrillers makes a character like Catherine susceptible to female-affirmative and gay-positive readings. If there is a taming-of-the-shrew aspect to Nick's interest in Catherine (hence the almost fatal remark about raising rug rats), her allure for him may also be traced to her impressive independence and authority: she is a successful writer able to author a scene in which a cop like him dies—or lives; she can ice-pick or embrace him. She can find pleasure by herself, with other women, or with men—with no sense of man as the necessary telos; she resists compulsory heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood, preferring to make her own choice. If the erotic thriller's "dangerous woman" betokens male fears of gender instability and sexual disorientation resulting from the feminist and queer movements of the eighties and nineties, she also offers possibilities of female strength and sexual agency that men too find *exciting*—even if these possibilities are still often figured through negative cultural stereotypes such as the dominatrix or *femme castratrice*.

## Horror

The uncertainty over whodunit at the end of *Basic Instinct* may be read positively as a way of perpetuating the allure of the "dangerous woman" for the male, but it might also be seen as akin to the fearful open-endedness of the contemporary horror movie, which leaves the way open for a sequel in which the monster will strike again. Patricia Mellencamp takes the latter interpretation of the ending's ambiguity: "This is the economic impulse of the male imaginary—another screenplay for millions of dollars, just as Joe Eszterhas received for this one, the highest price ever paid for a screenplay [\$3 million]. Not answering the question is a matter of men and money, not women and sexuality."<sup>24</sup> Although *Basic Instinct* had no literal sequels, the series of subsequent erotic thrillers in which lesbians or bisexual women are revealed to be in cahoots against the men—for example, *Bitter Harvest* (1993)—would seem to support Mellencamp's theory, though these are often similarly ambivalent in their attitude toward strong women and at least one is strongly gyne-positive—*Bound* (1996).

To the extent that erotic thrillers are phobic fantasies, they naturally borrow from the horror genre. In traditional horror, however, the hero saves the girl from the monster, whereas in



erotic thrillers the girl is the monster or, more accurately, she may be perceived as either the girl of his dreams or the gorgon of his nightmares. As in *Basic Instinct*, it is frequently hard to tell good girl from bad: Nick's caring psychiatrist and former girlfriend, Beth, is brunette, but may have done the killings in a blonde wig; Catherine is suspiciously blonde, but doesn't (seem to) kill in the end(?). Even in films where the murders turn out to have been committed by men—*Sea of Love* (1989), *Color of Night* (1994), *Jade* (1995)—the dangerous aura that has surrounded the female suspect throughout most of the film is not so easily dissipated by a last-minute exculpatory revelation.

If the passive female screaming to be saved in the horror film has mutated into the monstrously strong "dangerous woman" of the erotic thriller, it could be because of a backlash against feminism. Susan Faludi has documented how *Fatal Attraction* actually began as a feminist critique of a married man's irresponsible treatment of the single woman with whom he has an affair. However, writer James Dearden was pressured to do a series of rewrites in which "the husband became progressively more lovable, the single woman more venomous."<sup>25</sup> By the end, Alex/Glenn Close has "metamorphosed from the Other Woman into the Other, Woman"<sup>26</sup> as she threatens to take from Dan/Michael Douglas both his family and his life. Judith Williamson points out that the "threat of invasion which Alex represents is conveyed cinematically by a classic Horror convention: the hand-held camera circling the family house, giving us the point of view of the monster roaming menacingly outside."<sup>27</sup> In the film's finale, Dan and his wife combine to defeat the evil Alex: Dan attempts to drown her in the family bathtub, but when she springs back up for one last scare like many a movie monster, Dan's wife Beth/Anne Archer, a good-girl brunette, shoots the Medusa-locked blonde dead. Beth can be compared to the Final Girl who kills the monster at the end of many contemporary horror films.<sup>28</sup>

Significantly, the original ending to *Fatal Attraction* had *Madame Butterfly* on the soundtrack while Alex cut her throat in despair over having been abandoned by Dan; before she dies, she leaves his fingerprints on the knife to frame him for murder. But this conclusion—more compassionate toward Alex and more insistent on Dan's being held responsible for her fate—was later changed to the monster drowning and shooting we know today. Dearden says that preview audiences didn't like the first ending: "It was not cathartic. . . . They were all wound up to a pitch and then it all kind of went limp and there was no emotional payoff for them. They'd grown to hate this woman by this time, to the degree that they actually wanted him to have some retribution."<sup>29</sup> Director Adrian Lyne described the original ending as "two hours of foreplay with no orgasm."<sup>30</sup> The retributive violence directed against the dangerous woman's body in the final version of this erotic thriller is offered as sexually exciting (erect, orgasmic). Insofar as *Fatal Attraction* ends with a symbolic rape designed to consolidate phallic power, it must be considered strongly reactionary.

Robin Wood has noted how often the monogamous couple with stay-at-home wife is the "norm" in horror films against which the monster—in this case, Alex, the single woman, the working woman—is defined as deviant.<sup>31</sup> Director Lyne's atti-



tude toward women like Alex is worth quoting in full:

They are sort of overcompensating for not being men. It's sad, you know, because it kind of doesn't work. You hear

19 Chris Fowler, qtd. in Charles Lyons, *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 136.

20 Lyons, 138.

21 Phyllis Burke, qtd. in Lyons 135.

22 Paula Graham, qtd. in Lizzie Francke, "Someone to Look At," *Sight and Sound* 6.3 (March 1996), 26-27.

23 Ruth Picardie, "Mad, Bad and Dangerous," *New Statesman and Society* (1 May 1992), 36.

24 Patricia Mellencamp, *A Fine Romance...: Five Ages of Film Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 147.

25 Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1992), 118-19.

26 J. Hoberman, *Vulgar Modernism: Writing on Movies and Other Media* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 247.

27 Judith Williamson, *Deadline at Dawn: Film Criticism 1980-1990* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1993), 67.

28 See Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

29 James Dearden, qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash*, 122.

30 Adrian Lyne, qtd. in Elaine Berland and Marilyn Wechter, "Fatal/Fetal Attraction: Psychological Aspects of Imagining Female Identity in Contemporary Film," *Journal of Popular Culture* 26.3 (Winter 1992), 41.

31 Robin Wood, "The American Nightmare," *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 70-94.



feminists talk, and the last 10, 20 years, you hear women talking about fucking men rather than being fucked, to be crass about it. It's kind of unattractive, however liberated and emancipated it is. It kind of fights the whole wife role, the whole childbearing role. Sure you got your career and your success, but you are not fulfilled as a woman.

My wife has never worked. She's the least ambitious person I've ever met. She's a terrific wife. She hasn't the slightest interest in doing a career. She kind of lives with me, and it's a terrific feeling. I come home, and she's there.<sup>32</sup>

Small wonder that, once the evil Alex is killed and the camera lingers on a photo of Dan, Beth, and their daughter—the family smilingly restored—the words “AN ADRIAN LYNE FILM” are superimposed over this picture of bliss: Lyne appears to be a true believer in family values.

In *Fatal Attraction*, Alex represents the threat of all that can happen to a man if he indulges in casual, promiscuous, or illicit sex: exposure of the adultery to his wife; divorce resulting in forced separation from his child; competition in the workplace from a smart career woman; voracious sexual demands he isn't man enough to meet; claims on his money and time from another pregnant woman; and death from AIDS—this last being a kind of condensation of the former anxieties into one ultimate fear, unconscious (the word “AIDS” is never mentioned in the film) but all the more powerful for that. As Sarah Harwood describes the contagion, “Dan's brief affair with Alex leads directly to the material penetration of the family (unlike the ‘rules’ Dan invokes [where he is to penetrate her in a one-night stand], AIDS establishes [her penetration of him]). . . . Just as AIDS breaks down the body's immune system, so Alex attacks Dan's immune system (his family, which buttresses and services his public life and production) to render him vulnerable.”<sup>33</sup> In contemporary “slasher” films (*Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*), premarital sex is often punished by death as the monster cuts off contact between the illicit copulators forever. In an erotic thriller like *Fatal Attraction*, the woman with whom the man has forbidden sex is herself the castratory threat, as when Alex comes at Dan with a knife. Thus both genres enforce conventional sexual mores. In its overt gynephobia, *Fatal Attraction* is even more reactionary than most traditional horror movies: although these films are frequently repressive (the monster—Dracula, the Wolf Man—is often the embodiment of the male id that society feels must be put down), *Fatal Attraction* allows Dan to indulge his lust with Alex, then blames and kills her for it. As in horror, free-floating anxiety is projected onto an outsider who is scapegoated. But in the erotic thriller, the outsider's body is that of the independent, sexually active woman.

This description of erotic thrillers as similar to, and more ideologically pernicious than, horror leaves something crucial out of account: the man's attraction to the fearsome female. As Alex says to Dan after he has praised his wife and family, “If your life's so damn complete, what were you doing with me?” Robin Wood has argued that some contemporary horror (such as the films of Larry Cohen) can be classified as progressive in that there is a sneaking sympathy for the monster as an oppressed race/class or as the repressed id.<sup>34</sup> A case can be made for the

erotic thriller as extending this liberalizing trend in horror even further: its substitution of a woman for the monster isn't simply or necessarily gynephobic, but could be seen instead as a growing recognition of a strong woman's appeal. Dan's desire for his wife Beth is constantly interrupted by domestic duties (walking the dog, comforting his daughter). Alex saves him from sexual frustration (symbolized by his inability to open an umbrella in the rain). They copulate on the edge of a sink filled with dirty dishes, running water from the faucet over their excited bodies rather than using it dutifully to clean the dishes. While Beth is off scouting for a safe suburban home, Dan and Alex go to her apartment in New York City's meatpacking district, an area depicted as carnal and fiery; she stops the elevator to her loft between floors and goes down on him, and he is almost caught in *flagrante delicto* by a passer-by.

The “dangerous sex” Dan has with Alex ignites his passion and, if the rest of the movie is about his attempt to put out the fire in Alex (and perhaps to find it in his wife—there is a sensual scene in which he watches Beth rub lotion on her body), we should not forget the original appeal of the erotic thrills that the sexually adventurous Alex has provided. Certainly, viewers who watch these early sex scenes over and over again on video have not forgotten. Another way to say that Alex “seduces” Dan is to point out that he finds her desirable because she is actively *desiring*; apparently, her Medusa locks harden him into something other than stone. And it is worth noting that, while good-girl brunette Beth does shoot bad blonde Alex in the end, the opposition between the two women seems at least partially deconstructed by the film. As Dan begins to appreciate Beth's sexual side after his experience with Alex, Beth's hair begins to be styled in a Medusa-do similar to the other woman's. Furthermore, as Deborah Jermyn remarks, “Beth becomes stronger, more assertive, more violent and thus monstrous as the drama unfolds. She flies at Dan in a rage when he confesses to the affair” with Alex.<sup>35</sup> In the film's final scene, Beth rubs steam off the bathroom mirror until there can be seen her face and Alex's behind her, as if Alex were a side of Beth's own self she was just discovering. In struggling with Alex, Beth mirrors the other woman's passionate attachment to Dan, and in shooting her, Beth becomes herself the phallic woman that Alex was, with a power dreaded—and desired—by the man.

32 Adrian Lyne, qtd. in Susan Faludi, “Fatal Distortion,” *Mother Jones* 13.2 (Feb.-March 1988), 49.

33 Sarah Harwood, *Family Fictions: Representations of the Family in 1980s Hollywood Cinema* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), 122.

34 Robin Wood, 95-114.

35 Deborah Jermyn, “Rereading the Bitches from Hell: A Feminist Appropriation of the Female Psychopath,” *Screen* 37.3 (Autumn 1996), 257.

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