

The Crazy Ex-Girlfriend Trope and the Camera:
Fatal Attraction and Framing Characters

Watching *Fatal Attraction* (dir. Adrian Lyne, 1987) is a gendered experience. Portrayals of stalking in films have a tendency to be gendered, and so the stalking of Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas) can be seen as something that is defined by the gender of its protagonist (Dan) and antagonist (Alex). In films in which a man is doing the stalking and harassing, it is often seen as a misguided attempt at romance, one for which they are usually rewarded by the end of the film. Films like *Groundhog Day* (dir. Harold Ramis, 1993) and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (dir. Mark Webb, 2014) all show a man stalking a woman and eventually “wooing” her. It is different, however, the other way around. “When the gender roles are reversed and we see a female character stalking a man, her actions are typically portrayed as manic or unbalanced instead of endearing” (“Stalking for Love”). Why are women different? It is often how the camera and the story portrays their actions. Alex Forrest (Glen Close) is unbalanced and unwell throughout the film and is never shown to be endearing. Though sympathy can be read into her character, the camera and the sound design do not point to that being intentional.

Fatal Attraction is one of the films that cemented the manic, unbalanced ex-lover who seeks revenge on a *mostly* undeserving male. And the film goes to great lengths to ensure that the audience views Dan as sympathetic and Alex as crazy. Dan is given scenes in which he is a loving husband (interactions with Beth after she is in a car crash) and a good father (when he hugs his daughter after she finishes reading her lines for a play and tells her he loves her). Alex is given no such treatment, especially once her character turns.

In the scene where Dan returns to his apartment and learns that Alex is there, a tense, suspenseful track plays in the background. It is meant to put the audience on edge, and it picks

up when the camera is focused on Alex. This leads the audience to associating Alex with danger. She is the threat. The camera also plays into how the audience views Alex in this scene. During the shot/reverse shot of Alex and Dan, Dan is shot using a mounted camera, while Alex is shot with a handheld camera. The effect is that shot of Dan is static while Alex's shot is moving slightly. It creates a sense of energy in the frame that is not present in Dan's. That energy, coupled with the tense music, all works to put the audience on edge about Alex.

There is also the lighting. While the entire scene is shot with more low-key lighting, the light on Dan and Beth is soft while Alex is in hard light. You can tell hard light from soft light by the sharp line between shadows and light on the character's face. Alex has more pronounced shadows on her face even though she is supposed to be in the same lighting as both of the other characters. Unrealistic lighting is used for effect in movies all the time, and hard shadows can be used to make a character more menacing (although that is not the only effect that it creates).

Fatal Attraction is, literally, casting Alex in shadows while Dan and his wife are well-lit.

Another scene has Dan and Alex fighting in Alex's apartment. Despite the fact that Dan is the aggressor here (he is the first to yell and the first to become physical), again Alex is portrayed as the villain. When she gets close to him and brings up their weekend together, there is a music cue. At first, it sounds like a diegetic noise, like a car outside, it continues to swell as she continues talking. It is meant to make the viewer uneasy. The accompanying shot is an extreme close up—an over the shoulder shot at that. This brings the audience closer to Alex's face in order to see what looks like tears near her eye and a loving expression. Then, after Dan rejects her again, the music cuts out and her attitude changes. Music is a great way to create tension, but silence is an even better catalyst. The silence puts the viewer on edge as it heightens

the other sounds in the scene. The cinematography and sound design are working to negatively portray Alex while either neutrally or positively portraying Dan.

And that is just two scenes. Two instance of the camera, audio, and mise-en-scene all coming together to portray Alex as a crazy stalker while Dan and Beth are morally above her (insofar as Dan does not deserve the lengths that Alex goes to for revenge and should not be going through this despite cheating on his wife). And the effects of how the camera views Alex, and this film in general, is a continuation of a trope that is incredibly common in film. The “Crazy Bitch” or “Psycho Ex-Girlfriend” Trope is one the permeates both film and real life. Who has not heard a man proclaiming that he has a crazy ex-girlfriend? While this is often thrown at women who mostly just present their feelings whether or not a man cares, there is also the twist in which the woman is actually crazy.

But does Glen Close’s Alex deserve the title of crazy or psycho? The filmmaking definitely seems to think so. There are scenes simply meant to paint this woman as deeply disturbed (slitting her wrists, flashing the lights while alone, cutting her leg with a knife while threatening Beth) and no hints as to why. There is a brief mention that her story of her father dying is true, but it is easy to miss. There is the fact that her “biological clock” is running out of time, but that presents another dimension of misogyny. But these facts hardly work to justify her actions throughout the film. She is just crazy because they wanted her to be crazy. Using mental illness as a reason to fear a person is particularly harmful, and it is doubly so for women as they are often told that they are ‘making up’ their symptoms. Mental illness does not necessarily excuse someone’s behavior, but it can definitely explain why they did it. Alex Forrest is vilified for being mentally ill because they do not separate her actions from her mental illness.

In the piece “30 Years Later: Why *Fatal Attraction* Never Sat Right with Glen Close,” former Paramount executive Ned Tanen is quoted as saying that “They [test audiences] want[ed] us to terminate the bitch with extreme prejudice.” This reaction comes from the original ending in which Alex kills herself and frames Dan for her murder. An ending in which Dan faces more severe consequences was turned down because the test audience wanted Alex to die. Dan does deserve some sort of punishment. He did commit a morally reprehensible act by cheating on his wife. While she is angry with him in the moment, by the end, they are embracing and the audience is left to assume that their marriage continues as normal.

Why does that feel like a better ending? Again, this comes from how the characters are framed by the narrative and the camera. *Fatal Attraction* did not give a reason as to why Alex Forrest should gain any type of vindication in the end. She was clearly framed as the villain, as can be seen in the scene broken down above, so an ending in which she comes out on top by getting Dan sent to jail does not sit well with the audience. This movie makes Dan seem to be undeserving of his punishment as it currently is—his family alive and his marriage intact—and so the viewer would most likely take issue with Alex coming out victorious in some twisted way.

If the camera or story viewed Alex differently, perhaps she would not have been the crazy bitch or the villain. Perhaps she could have been seen as she truly is: a sick woman in need of help. Take out the sinister music, and hard light, the strange visual clues and you are left with a story about a woman who wants a man to take responsibility for getting her pregnant. The movie would have been much better off if it did not frame Alex in such a negative light and presented her as a three dimensional antagonist. She did not necessarily need to be completely sympathetic, but allowing the audience to at least understand her backstory and motivations

could eliminate the tonal dissonance between what the audience is experiencing on the screen and what was intended with the original ending.

Bibliography

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