Abstract: Fatal Attraction, Basic Instinct, and Body of Evidence are three films that forge a connection between the cinematic femme fatale genre and an imagistic and narrative focus on masochism. The author argues that the foregrounding of masochistic desire acts to complicate our understanding of the male gaze and female spectatorial pleasure; thus, these films present a serious challenge to inherited theories of spectatorship.

Keywords: feminist film theory, femme fatale, the male gaze, masochism

In Fatal Attraction (1987), Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) absentmindedly and repeatedly slashes her own leg before turning the knife on her lover’s wife. In Basic Instinct (1992), Nick Curran (Michael Douglas) willingly places himself in the same position as the victim of a sex crime, allowing himself to be tied up and seduced by the woman he believes to be the murderer, and later calls the experience “the fuck of the century.” In Body of Evidence (1993), Frank Dulaney (Willem Dafoe) discovers that he finds it sexually pleasurable to have hot candle wax poured on his genitals. Together, these three films forge a connection between the cinematic femme fatale genre and an imagistic and narrative focus on masochism.

The past fifteen years of the twentieth century saw a proliferation of films that, like these, foreground scenarios of masochism. Not coincidentally, film theory, especially as practiced in academia, was invested in a psychoanalytic methodology that posited masochism as a central mechanism of spectatorial viewing for women. Female spectatorship was theorized in light of assumptions about the primacy of the male gaze and of a perception of masochism that stressed victimization and passivity. Thanks in large part to queer theory, however, there has been a reevaluation of this model. Revisiting and challenging long-held assumptions about sadomasochistic desire and power dynamics, recent queer theory has proposed a more nuanced model that emphasizes strategy, control, and the mutability of gender roles. Many feminist and film scholars have contested the theory of the male gaze, but it has not yet been examined within the framework of this different way of understanding masochistic psychodynamics. Although film theory has in recent years moved...
Deconstructing the Male Gaze

By Miranda Sherwin

Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) attacks Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas), in Fatal Attraction.

away from this primarily psychoanalytic focus toward a more historicized methodology, it is worth reexamining both the films that take masochism as their subject and the theories about masochistic spectatorship. This article, then, undertakes a closer examination of these theories and their manifestations in these three films. This exploration will complicate notions of the male gaze and passive masochistic female spectatorship as well as open up new possibilities in the theorizing of male and female spectatorial pleasure.

Deconstructing the Male Gaze

“I’d love to find a film with a strong premise that isn’t as sexist as Fatal Attraction but that taps into a girl myth as powerfully as that movie tapped into a boy myth,” comments Sleepless in Seattle producer Lynda Obst (qtd. in Andrews H22). Fatal Attraction tells the story of Dan Gallagher, a happily married man who nevertheless has a brief affair with Forrest. Although Forrest assures him that she is discreet, she refuses to leave him alone when the weekend is over. He tries to erase her from his life, but as the movie progresses, she becomes increasingly intrusive and threatening: she calls him at work, turns up at his home, pours acid on his car, cooks his daughter’s pet rabbit, kidnaps his daughter, and finally tries to kill his wife. Forrest is the quintessential femme fatale, the sexually dangerous woman.

What makes this a “male myth,” presumably, is the control that the male protagonist can exert over the femme fatale and what she represents. In Laura Mulvey’s influential essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” what women represent is sexual difference itself, which, in turn, is the principle around which spectatorship can be theorized. According to Mulvey, “Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the absence of the penis as visually ascertainable, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father” (35; see also Mulvey, “Afterthoughts”). In this formulation, women on both sides of the screen become elided with absence. As filmic representations, women are the bearers of the bleeding wound of castration, the signification of the lack of penis/phallus. As spectators, women are forced into either passive masochistic identification with the female protagonist, always depicted as the object of male desire, or into masculinized identification with the male protagonist and his controlling look. In what has become one of the most quoted passages in feminist film theory, Mulvey argues, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (33). Because identification with the objectified and controlled female protagonist must be painful and because the male gaze is active and controlling, female spectators must either take a masochistic stance or adopt the male gaze, becoming spectatorial transvestites.

Fatal Attraction perfectly exemplifies the filmic negotiation of castration anxiety that Mulvey asserts as central to organizing spectatorial pleasure around thematically male psychoscenarios. She contends, “The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object” (35). Forrest evokes the fear of castration in Gallagher, but he is able to investigate her and “demystify her mystery.” He breaks into her apartment, looks through her medicine chest and her scrapbook, and finally pronounces judgment: she is “sick.” In fact, she is so sick that there is no possibility of “saving the guilty object”; instead, she is devalued and punished, killed by his long-suffering wife, Beth (Anne Archer).

This film appears to be quintessentially male: it narrates the male psychodrama of the resolution of castration anxiety; it establishes identification with the male protagonist, who controls events; and it objectifies and finally punishes the woman who threatens him. The attraction is, after all, fatal only to Forrest. Body of Evidence and Basic Instinct follow the same pattern, although the “investigation” of the woman is situated within a legal discourse, as one male protagonist is a lawyer and the other a police detective. In theory, then, there should be no female spectatorial position that is not masochistic; and indeed, Susan Faludi, arguing that Fatal Attraction is part of a backlash against women, depicts women viewers as uncomfortably silent, voiceless, while the men around them urge Gallagher to “[p]unch the bitch’s face in” (112). Yet, a closer examination of these films reveals narrative and cinematic strategies that undermine male identification and dislocate the male gaze.

Andrews’s review of Fatal Attraction illustrates this point: “Did this movie ever explain what was so great about the Michael Douglas character? Yet a brilliant, accomplished career woman went stark raving mad and boiled a bunny just
because of her passion for him. Despite the two strong women’s roles, this is a man’s film” (H15). Andrews implies that what makes this a “man’s film” is that it is a vehicle for stroking the male ego—Douglas’s, in this case, and by extension, the audience members’ who identify with him. Douglas has a propensity to star in films that cast him as the object of desire for a beautiful but deadly woman, but Douglas lacks whatever quality it is that makes a star into a sex symbol. For but Douglas lacks whatever quality it is him. Douglas has a propensity to star the audience members’ who identify with Douglas’s, in this case, and by extension, what makes this a “man’s film” is that it the two strong women’s roles, this is a because of her passion for him. Despite

176 JPF&T—Journal of Popular Film and Television

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Evidence

These films do not deconstruct female desire so much as they deconstruct men

as the objects of desire. As Andrews

implies, Forrest’s obsession with Gal-

lager is inexplicable in light of what we

know of his character, and closer

analysis reveals that it is not him that she

desires, per se: she wants, she says, “a

little respect.” Over and over, Alex insists

that her behavior stems from a rebellion

against his treatment of her, against his

temptation to erase her from his life. When

he berates her for showing up at his

apartment, she responds, “Well, what am

I supposed to do? You won’t answer my

calls; you change your number. I’m not

going to be ignored, Dan.” The object of

her desire is not him so much as it is non-

invisibility—a particularly appropriate

desire for a female filmic subject often

defined through absence and lack.

In Body of Evidence, too, the object

of Rebecca Carlson’s desire is decep-

tive. Carlson (Madonna) is on trial for

the murder of her lover, a rich older

man who has left his considerable for-

tune to her and whom she has alleg-

edly fornicated to death. During the trial,

she initiates an affair with her lawyer,

Dulaney, introducing him to masochistic

practices; when his wife reads the signs

of the affair on his body (he has been cut

by glass and burned by wax), she throws

him out. Throughout the film, Dulaney

seems to inhabit a privileged space in

Carlson’s sex life: whereas her other

lovers were all elderly multimillionaires

with bad hearts and thus potential vic-
tims, he is young and healthy, with mid-

dle-income earnings. The assumption is,

then, Carlson’s desire for the others was

“staged” to induce them to leave her their

money, but that her desire for Dulaney is

“real.” It is only at the film’s denouement

that the audience discovers that even her

desire for Dulaney was staged: she was

sleeping with him because she believed

that his passion for her would positively

affect his defense of her. Just as in Fatal

Attraction, the male lead only appears to be

the objects of female desire; as the stories unfold, the women

use them to accomplish their own ends

posing the question as to whether their desire is “real” or “staged.” In fact, the

narrative structure of these films sug-

gests that female heterosexual desire is

always staged, that female desire is an “act” designed to deceive men. By

extension, the cinema is the stage on which female desire is simultaneously

constructed and revealed as constructed; or, to use a more appropriate metaphor,

the cinema is the screen on which the

illusion of female heterosexual desire is

projected and exposed as both illusion

and projection.

These films do not deconstruct female desire so much as they deconstruct men

course of the investigation, Curran, the
detective in charge of the case, starts an

affair with her, despite his initial belief

that she is guilty. As the affair continues,

he becomes convinced that Tramell is

innocent and that the real murderer is his

psychiatrist, Elizabeth Garner (Jeanne

Tripplehorn), with whom both he and

Tramell have had a sexual relationship.

The case hinges on which of the two

women became obsessed with the other

after a one-night stand in college: if Gar-

ner pursued and harassed Tramell, then

Garner would be guilty, and vice versa.

Curran comes to believe Tramell’s ver-

sion of the story—that Garner staged the

murder to frame her—and thus, after his

partner is stabbed to death in Garner’s

vicinity, he shoots her.

The film ends with Curran and Tra-

mell in bed, discussing their future: he

wants to “fuck like minks, raise rug rats,

and live happily ever after”; he believes

in her innocence and in her love for

him. But the film does not end with

the words “happily ever after”; instead,

the camera pans down from the bed to

reveal an ice pick. If Tramell is the real

murderer, then it becomes apparent that

Garner was her real victim and that the

retired rock star and Curran’s partner

were killed to frame Garner. Moreover,

in this new scenario, Curran is not the

object of Tramell’s desire so much as the

tool by which she enacts her real desire:

revenge against the woman who rejected

her in college. Although it appears that

Tramell’s bisexuality has been converted

into heterosexuality, her heterosexuality

is a disguise concealing her lesbianism:

Garner was the object of her desire, not

Curran or the rock star. Heterosexu-

ality functions in relation to lesbianism in

this film much as Joan Riviere argues

that femininity functions in relation to

masculinity: “Womanliness [. . .] could

be assumed and worn as a mask, both to

hide the possession of masculinity and to

avert the reprisals expected if she were

found to possess it” (213). The movie

appears to foreground heterosexuality:

Tramell seems to lose interest in her lover,

Roxy, as soon as a man—Curran—comes

along, and Tramell’s affair with Garner is

portrayed by both women as insignificant.

However, lesbian desire lies at the heart of

the murder mystery, and heterosexuality

is not depicted.
is merely a mask that at once conceals and enacts her true desire.

In these films, the substitution of values such as visibility, money, power, lesbianism, and revenge for heterosexuality provides the psychosexual backdrop from which masochism will emerge as a featured desire, in addition to narrativizing female polysexuality. As Luce Irigaray notes, male sexuality has traditionally been defined monolithically; in relation to the penis, but female sexuality, “always at least double, goes further: it is plural” (28; emphasis in original). Sexual plurality, like the polysexuality depicted in *femme fatale* films, suggests that men and heterosexual intercourse are not necessary to fulfill female desire. According to Irigaray, man is dependent on an other for sexual satisfaction, while woman is autoerotic and therefore needs no one. This, in addition to castration anxiety, is what woman represents for man: autoeroticism, sexual independence.

*Body of Evidence* makes this symbolic representation explicit. Toward the end of the film, Dulaney begins to lose faith in Carlson’s innocence and tries to end their affair. She lies down on the floor and starts masturbating; he is riveted, rooted to the spot, unable to leave. Her sexual autonomy is too threatening to his masculinity: he wrestles her into handcuffs and forcibly penetrates her, reinstating genital intercourse as the primary and ultimate function of sexuality. The *femmes fatales* in these films are fatal because they do not really need men. Even if they engage in intercourse with men, they are notoriously sexually liberated, emphasizing other non-genital forms of pleasure such as bondage and sadomasochism. Thus, in Dulaney’s first sexual encounter with Carlson, the moment of climax comes when she pours molten wax on his penis; their affair is initiated on her terms, and she does not require vaginal penetration. Although female sexual experimentation provides obvious pleasure to the men, it is also immensely threatening. For these autoerogenous, polysexual women, men are expendable—a point hammered home literally by the plot device of murder.

In *Basic Instinct*, women kill in acts of rage directed specifically against men and the family. Tramell is not the only murderer in this film; she has befriend-ed two women, Roxy and Hazel, who have killed their entire families. When Curran discovers Roxy’s bloody history, he asks what her motive had been and his partner, Gus, explains, “This young farmgirl got tired of all that attention going to her little brothers, so she fixed them. Just like old Hazel Dobkins fixed her whole family, except young Roxy here didn’t use a wedding present: she used Daddy’s razor.” This explanation is interesting on several counts. First, Gus interprets Roxy’s killing as motivated by jealousy of her male siblings, invoking a patriarchal family structure that favors boys over girls. Second, the language that he uses—“so she fixed them”—positions the crime as, symbolically, a castration enacted by appropriating “Daddy’s razor”; again, he constitutes her anger as directed against men, against the phallus. Finally, he reveals that Hazel, Tramell’s other murderous friend, killed with a knife she had received as a wedding present, thus connecting her rage to her marriage. Even Tramell has killed her parents, although Curran cannot prove it. It is no wonder, then, that when Curran proposes that they “fuck like minks, raise rug rats, and live happily ever after,” Tramell’s only response is “I don’t like rug rats.” In the three cases, female violence is enacted within and directed against the family—specifically, the men of the family.

The fact that the male protagonists in these films do not act as true erotic object choices for the female protagonists serves a dual function. It enacts their desexualization, thus protecting the male spectator from homosexual identification. However, it also dislocates them from a heterosexual context, in that they also are not desired by their own object choice, the *femme fatale*. Moreover, in addition to challenging their status as sexual objects, these films work on another level to undermine the male protagonists’ place as subject, as the person around whom the narrative is organized and controlled. Mulvey asserts that scopophilia derives first from identification with the male protagonist and second from vicarious control over the film’s events, achieved through that identification. These films, however, problematize the extent to which the male protagonists actually control events. In *Fatal Attraction*, Gallagher is rendered passive and helpless in the face of Forrest’s terrorism for much of the movie, and ultimately it is his wife who succeeds in killing her where he could not. In *Body of Evidence*, Dulaney is utterly deceived by Carlson; he appears to control the courtroom drama, but she is manipulating the evidence and the testimony behind the scenes. Like Gallagher, he is unable to control her even after her deception is exposed: instead, another spurned lover shoots her. (Interestingly, she dies exactly as Alex does in *Fatal Attraction*: sadistically, she is shot and then drowned.)

*Basic Instinct* captures this dynamic most clearly. Curran never wavers from his faith in his own abilities as an investigator, and at the film’s close, he is secure in his belief that he has solved the crime. In truth, however, he has killed an innocent woman, unknowingly acting as Tramell’s agent, and is sleeping with the real murderer. Not only has he been utterly deceived but also has acted as a character in her script, a script inscribed literally in the film as a plot device: Tramell wrote a book, *Love Hurts*, about the murder—ice-pick of a rock star that predates the murder. Indeed, the movie’s premise is that whatever she writes comes true: as the movie unfolds, she explains that her new book is about a detective who “falls for the wrong woman,” which is, in essence, the subject of the movie. Here, however, *Basic Instinct* deviates from the traditional *femme-fatale* film, in that it neither establishes Tramell as the “right” woman, innocent of all charges against her (although it pretends to do so by piling up “evidence” against Garner), nor punishes her for her guilt. That Curran only appears to control the action or to hold her desire suggests that male control of the look or of the action has always been illusory and something that patriarchy must fight to maintain. The mere fact that the spectator knows more at the film’s end than does the protagonist with whom he or she has supposedly been identifying breaks that identification and undermines the male gaze. In fact, Tramell’s script can be understood on a metaphorical level as well, in that she is writing what we
might think of as a new cultural script, a feminist script that reveals the threat that an independent, working, bisexual woman represents to man, as well as the fragility of the control that man can exert over her.

In these films, men do not inhabit the space that they seem to inhabit. Both through the displacement of men as the objects of female desire and through the subversion of their agency as subjects, the protagonists are repositioned in relation to the films’ narrative structure: they are decentered, marginalized. Their desirability is delusion; their control is illusion. What these films really inscribe is thus an absence in the space the male protagonist is supposed to inhabit at the films’ center. This is particularly ironic when considered in relation to the role women have been theorized as inhabiting—an absence-in-presence, in that they embody the lack of penis, the threat of castration. Significantly, this absence-in-presence that establishes a link between male and female occurs not at the beginning of the films but at the end. For example, in the much-analyzed final scene in Fatal Attraction, Gallagher and Beth leave the room after Beth has killed Forrest and the camera zooms in on a photograph of the Gallaghers. Thus, the film’s final emphasis is not on the family, but on the representation of the family. This, in turn, self-referentially evokes the nature of cinematic representation and doubly inscribes the effect of absence-in-presence, lingering over an image of a filmic space shared by the two sexes.

A male absence-in-presence is particularly problematic for theories of spectatorship presumed, following Mulvey, to be male identified. Struggling with the issue of female spectatorship, Doane discusses a photograph taken by Robert Doisneau in 1948 as a metaphor for the mechanisms by which the female spectatoral gaze is problematized. She argues that “in line with Freud’s analysis of the dirty joke, the photograph insures a complicity between the man and the presumably male spectator, operating to exclude the woman and that ‘Doisneau’s photograph is not readable by the female spectator—it can give her pleasure only in masochism’” (40; Doane is quoting herself). In these films, however, the joke is against the men, both spectator and protagonist, who falsely assume their own centrality and control. Those identifying with the male protagonist will find in the end that they have been deceived, whereas those identifying with the female protagonist will find that they have been controlling the action all along—which, if they are good readers, they will have suspected anyway, for the signs are there, coded for the female gaze. Following the narrative displacement of the male protagonist as both subject and object of the story, it is clear that the films assume a complicity between the female protagonist and the female spectator, a complicity that stages the male protagonist as the butt of the joke.

The absence-in-presence of the male protagonist at the film’s center does not so much prohibit identification with him as render such identification more difficult; it does not transform the gaze from male to female so much as displace the terms on which the gaze is constructed. Mulvey placed “the power of the male protagonist [to] control events” as the cornerstones on which spectatorial identification and the male gaze is constructed; it follows that if the protagonist’s control over events, and even his own central positioning within the narrative, is unstable, then the dynamics of identification and the production of the gaze must be similarly unstable. According to Steve Neale, “Cinema draws on and involves many desires, many forms of desire. And desire itself is mobile, fluid, constantly transgressing identities, positions and roles. Identifications are multiple, fluid, at points even contradictory” (278). Neale argues that “the elements [Mulvey] considers in relation to images of women can and should also be considered in relation to images of men,” but he is forced to concur “with her basic premise that the spectatoral look in mainstream cinema is implicitly male: it is one of the fundamental reasons why the erotic elements involved in the relations between the spectator and the male image have constantly to be repressed and disavowed” (286).

Interestingly, the thematic insistence in these femme-fatale films on masochistic practices serves to foreground the very “erotic elements” that Neale claims must be repressed. Doane articulates the dilemma of the female spectator: “Given the structures of cinematic narrative, the woman who identifies with a female character must adopt a passive or masochistic position, while identification with the active hero necessarily entails an acceptance of what Laura Mulvey refers to as a certain ‘masculinization’ of spectatorship” (24). But if women are identifying masochistically with the female protagonist (a formulation already problematized by the extent to which the female figures actively control the narrative action), how are men identifying in films in which the male protagonist is, literally, a masochist? As masochism has always been assumed to be a female stance, are men both as spectators and as characters, being forced to assume a female subject position? Are men being feminized through identification with a masochistic subject? And what of the already masculinized female spectator?

**Theorizing Masochism**

In his influential study “A Child is Being Beaten,” Freud hypothesizes that men, “in their masochistic phantasies [. . .] invariably transfer themselves into the part of a woman; that is to say, their masochistic attitude coincides with a feminine one” (126; emphasis in original; see also, Freud, “Economic”). Indeed, many analysts have equated masochism and femininity, primarily because of the assumed passivity of both roles. It is even argued that masochism is an intrinsic element of femininity; Sandra Lee Bartky distinguishes between the “perversion” masochism propounded by Samois, a lesbian feminist organization of sadomasochistic women, and what she calls “ordinary feminine masochism [. . .] so characteristic of women that it has been regarded by all psychoanalysts and many feminists as one of the typical marks of femininity in this culture” (150). Bartky goes on, however, to collapse the difference between “perversion” and “ordinary” masochism, stating that the two have in common the sexualization of domination and submission, albeit to different degrees. Feminine masochism, like femininity in general, is an
with his: we are seeing what he is seeing. The film then cuts again, to show state prosecutor Robert Garrett (Joe Mantegna) and the police arriving at the house; when we next see the man, he is dead. This scene replicates Freud's first stage of the masochistic personality, only Freud's beating is here conflated by the sex-death opposition; the "beating," configured as a possible murder, exists in the cut and is reconstituted in the juxtaposition of sex with death. Our own spectatorial gaze is, for the first of many times, dislocated: we thought we were to align our gaze with the man's, but he is dead and cannot be the protagonist with whom we are to identify. In fact, through our initial identification with him, we, too, have been punished; even in the first moments of the film, identification with the male subject is constituted as masochistic.

It is also interesting to note the many ways in which the film insists on the male absence-in-presence discussed earlier. Our first exposure to a male subject is to his image on a television screen; he is an image, not a reality. Our next exposure reveals him to be dead: he is not our protagonist; we are not to identify with him. Our next exposure to a male subject presents Garrett, and, because he arrives on the crime scene with the police and an attendant air of authority, we assume that he is the protagonist; we are not to identify with him. Our next exposure to a male subject presents Garrett, and, because he arrives on the crime scene with the police and an attendant air of authority, we assume that he is the protagonist; the film immediately starts to channel our seeing through him as he controls the investigation, as he, in turn, looks at the videotape. But this identification, too, is false and is shattered shortly thereafter, when Dulaney, a defense attorney, who is the "real" protagonist, arrives. Our spectatorial gaze has, just minutes into the film, already been constructed and deconstructed three times. Identification with the male figure is rendered problematic from the onset and not just through the deconstructed gaze; whereas we assumed an association with "the law," as represented by Garrett, our real association is with Dulaney, defender of the alleged criminal, Carlson.

Basic Instinct's opening scene is remarkably similar to that of Body of Evidence. The film's first scene is of a couple having sex, but our gaze is literally fragmented through a camera effect that makes it difficult to determine what we are actually seeing. The image becomes clearer, but at the moment when we identify what is happening, the camera pans down, and we realize that we had been looking not at the "real" couple, but rather at their reflection in a ceiling mirror. As in Body of Evidence, the woman is on top and the man is tied up; also as in Body of Evidence, this man is not the protagonist, and he is shortly to die. Unlike in Body of Evidence, however, the moment of "beating" is not elided; as the couple reaches climax, the woman takes an ice pick from under the covers and stabs (beats) him repeatedly. A final similarity is worth noting: although the protagonist is a homicide detective who appears to be aligned with the law, he is under investigation by Internal Affairs for shooting some tourists; thus, like Dulaney, he too is associated with criminality.

Appropriately enough, Curran's and Dulaney's criminal investigations coincide with an investigation into their own sexuality, which corresponds to the second phase of Freud's beating scenario. In this phase, the child-spectator has experienced jealousy over the attention shown to the beaten child and desires him or herself to be beaten. Whereas the previous phase engaged mechanisms of sadistic voyeurism, this phase calls for active masochistic participation, and in the two films, both Curran and Dulaney place themselves in the same situation as the men who were just beaten/killed. Carlson's victim/lover supposedly died from a heart attack induced during or immediately following sadomasochistic sex; Dulaney allows Carlson to tie him up and pour hot wax on his chest and genitals. Tramell's victim/lover died when she tied him to the bed with a white silk scarf and then stabbed him with an ice pick during orgasm; Curran allows Tramell to tie him to the bed with a white silk scarf, exactly replicating the conditions of the murder with himself positioned as the next victim. This scenario is twice repeated in the film, and neither time does she kill him, but he experiences great sexual satisfaction because of his fear and calls it "the fuck of the century."

For the male subjects in Basic Instinct and Body of Evidence, their masochism...
engenders an exploration of a feminine stance, and their personal investigation of masochism coincides with their criminal investigation into their suspects’ sexuality. Indeed, the investigations in both films revolve around the sexual beliefs and practices of the women under suspicion; what is being investigated is not so much murder as female sexuality and sexual difference. Basic Instinct makes this explicit in the notorious scene where the police interview Tramell:

CORELLI. Would you tell us the nature of your relationship with Mr. Boz?

TRAMELL. I had sex with him for about a year and a half. I liked having sex with him. He wasn’t afraid of experimenting. I like men like that, men who give me pleasure. He gave me a lot of pleasure.

CORELLI. Did you ever engage in any sadomasochistic activity?

TRAMELL. Exactly what did you have in mind, Mr. Corelli?

CORELLI. Did you ever tie him up?

TRAMELL. No.

CURRAN. You never tied him up?

TRAMELL. Johnny liked to use his hands too much. I like hands and fingers.

WALKER. You describe a silk scarf in your book.

TRAMELL. I’ve always had a fondness for silk scarves. They’re good for all occasions.

CURRAN. But you said you like men to use their hands, didn’t you?

TRAMELL. No. I said I liked Johnny to use his hands. I don’t make any rules, Nick. I go with the flow.

During this interrogation, the detectives become aroused. The camera pans from face to face, showing the men perspiring and licking their lips; their mouths become so dry that they each must fetch water from the cooler. As the questioning continues, Tramell uncrosses her legs and reveals that she is wearing no underwear; the detectives start to stutter and lose the thread of the conversation. As in the opening sequence, the spectator’s gaze is aligned with theirs through the mechanism of the video camera recording the proceedings, and Tramell is positioned as the subject of that gaze. The film enacts a strange kind of reversal, however, in that her spectators’ arousal reads as discomfiture and lack of control; she seems to be completely in control, despite her dual role as suspect of their investigation and object of their desire. This scene enacts Mulvey’s formulation of the symbolic role of woman, only it renders that role literal: Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the absence of the penis as visually ascertainable, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. (35) Here, the “material evidence” of castration is figured literally in Tramell’s exposure of her vagina and is furthermore figured as “evidence” in a criminal investigation that itself renders literal Mulvey’s metaphorical reference to the “law” of the father. Moreover, the detectives’ gaze combines “enjoyment” and “anxiety” precisely because the sight of her vagina “always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified,” just as Tramell herself at the movie’s conclusion will always threaten to kill again, for the ice pick will still be under the bed, ready to be wielded again.

Body of Evidence takes the threat posed by woman’s body even more literally, as is evidenced by the title. As in Basic Instinct, the investigation focuses on Carlson’s sex life; she is arrested after Garrett asks her whether she considers herself a dominatrix, a sadomasochist. Here, however, her body itself is theorized as the weapon:

DULANEY. You don’t know it was homicide.

GARRETT. The method’s self-explanatory.

DULANEY. What are you going to do, bag the body as a murder weapon? Exhibit A? It’s not a crime to be a good lay.

GARRETT. Well, sure, I’d have to have myself indicted.

This last exchange, although flippant, betrays a distinction made by the film between male and female sexuality—for a man, sexual prowess is something to brag about; for a woman, it is a crime.

Garrett spells out the conflation of “body” and “weapon” in his opening statement at the trial:

Andrew Marsh made what turned out to be a fatal mistake: he fell in love. He fell in love with a ruthless, calculating woman who went after an elderly man with a bad heart and a big bank account. You all can see the defendant, Rebecca Carlson, but as this trial proceeds, you will see that she is not only the defendant; she is the murder weapon itself. If I hit you, and you die, I am the cause of your death. But can I be called a weapon? The answer is yes. And what a deadly weapon Rebecca Carlson made of it. The state will prove that she seduced Andrew Marsh and manipulated his affections until he rewrote his will, leaving her 8 million dollars. That she insisted on increasingly strenuous sex knowing he had a severe heart condition, and that when that didn’t work fast enough for her, she secretly doped him with cocaine. His heart couldn’t take the combination, and she got what she wanted. She is a beautiful woman. But when this trial is over, you will see her no differently than a gun or a knife or any other instrument used as a weapon. She’s a killer, and the worst kind: a killer who disguised herself as a loving partner.

Implicit in this statement is the idea that Marsh had no control over his own sexuality or choices. She “insisted” on “increasingly strenuous sex,” in which he, apparently, had no choice but to participate. She “manipulated” him into changing his will, and although there is no evidence of coercion on her part, he is still not held accountable for his bad decision. Marsh apparently characterized himself in such passive terms, for, according to his secretary (Anne Archer) he felt that his sexual activities were too strenuous but placed the responsibility for this solely on Carlson: “[He said] that he was worried. [. . .] He said that if she kept it up, she was going to kill him, that his heart couldn’t take it.”

One of the funniest scenes in the movie plays on the ludicrousness of such assumptions about the lack of male control when confronted with female sexuality. In this scene, one of Carlson’s former lovers, Jeffrey Roston (Frank Langella), another older man with a bad heart, is called to the witness stand. Garrett asks him questions about his sex life with Carlson:
The implications of this argument are startling when viewed in light of the gendering of masochism. Consider the fact that the masochistic position is female and that the sadistic position is male, regardless of the biological sex of the subjects. Smirnoff claims that “the real meaning of the masochistic contract” is to “render the executioner’s task more oppressive”; in other words, the masochist wants to render the sadist uncomfortable with his own sadism. Applying the gendered model of masochism to Smirnoff’s equation, the corollary is that the masochistic woman is trying to render the man’s sadism more oppressive to him. Given the conflation that takes place in the sadomasochistic relationship between female-masochist and male-sadist, it becomes clear that the goal of the relationship, from the woman’s perspective, is to render the man’s masculinity more oppressive to him. Pain and humiliation can thus be understood to be the means rather than the end: by enacting in a greatly exaggerated form the pain and humiliation inherent in gendered relationships, the masochist hopes to force the man to recognize and renounce the sadistic nature of masculinity. Masochism is thus a kind of performance of the tyranny of gender.

The *femme-fatale* films invoke this tyranny through the repeated use of scenarios of rape. For the most part, the male protagonists have played the masochist to the female’s sadist. However, it is quite clear that Tramell and Carlson play the sadist as part of a fantasy shared by both of the sexual partners. There is never any suggestion that the men are forced or coerced into participating in the fantasy, from which they both derive pleasure. Nevertheless, there is a moment in these films when the men become threatened by the passivity of their roles and respond with rape.

For Dulaney, the moment comes when he begins to question Carlson’s innocence. In his testimony, Roston describes a sexual scenario almost exactly like the one Carlson had enacted with him before. Dulaney clearly feels that he has been deceived and is unimportant to her, and he reasserts control and dominance by wrestling her into handcuffs and then entering her from behind. Although she struggles at first, like many cinematic rape victims, she seems to wind up enjoying herself; nevertheless, the spectator is left with the impression that whereas female sadism is erotic, male sadism is dangerous.

*Fatal Attraction* stages a similar moment, although the rape occurs metaphorically. The first time Gallagher and Forrest have sex, she is perched on the kitchen sink. When he tries to kill her, he does so at the same sink; he attempts to strangle her, and when he finally stops, both are panting, gasping for breath, as if they have just had intercourse again. The scene is staged so that even the camera angle replicates the earlier sex scene.

In *Basic Instinct*, Curran too erupts into violence. Tramell has been teasing him but has not yet initiated sexual contact, and he reacts by raping his ex-lover, Garner. Unlike Carlson, she does not struggle, but neither does she derive pleasure from the experience; instead, she is furious and hurt. Again, male sexual aggression is shown to be sadistic and nonconsensual. Even if the rape were positioned as a female fantasy, which is at once implied and problematized, it is not a fantasy that Garner chooses in the same way that Curran chooses to allow Tramell to tie him up with her silk scarf; rather, it is a fantasy he imposes on her. Although female sadism and male masochism are thus shown to be erotic and consensual, female masochism and male sadism are depicted in a context of rape and violation.

This inversion of roles invokes Freud’s formulation of the beating fantasy. In the third and final phase, it is no longer clear who is beating whom, although the fantasy is once again sadistic. In these films, too, the final effect is not to reestablish fixed gender roles but instead to collapse them. By invoking sadomasochism, these films narrativize a constantly fluctuating system by which gender identity is signified. Rather than inscribing difference, these films emphasize the psychosexual similarity between the male and female protagonists.

In *Fatal Attraction*, therefore, Forrest and Gallagher alternate as victim and victimizer: Forrest slashes her wrists; Forrest hounds and harasses Gallagher; Gallagher tries to kill Forrest; Forrest tries to kill Gallagher. Discussions of the film have focused on the extent to which it is possible to identify with Forrest.
On the one hand, she is insane, violent, predatory, and finally, dead. On the other hand, she controls the film’s action until the end, when another woman gains control; she enacts a revenge fantasy that anyone who has ever been rejected can enjoy; and she is given some powerful lines. Equally interesting, though, is the extent to which identification with Galagher is rendered problematic: he is an adulterer, a liar, and a lawyer; he is violent and attempts murder; he is played by Douglas. Between the two protagonists, there is no comfortable identification to be made. Instead, identification is constantly shifting as each in turn takes on sadistic or masochistic stances.

In Basic Instinct, too, differences between the male and female protagonist are collapsed. Curran is slowly revealed to be as much of a killer as Tramell is: he has killed tourists, and Tramell’s theory that he was “sucked into” it and “like[d] it too much” has a ring of truth. Moreover, as the film progresses he is more and more elided with her, repeating her lines and mirroring her experiences: like her, he has used cocaine and beaten a lie-detector test; like her, he resumes smoking and drinking. He even is subjected to the same kind of inquiry she underwent in the interrogation scene, only this time, he is the suspect, the object of the gaze. Although this scene almost exactly duplicates the scene of Tramell as suspect, here a lone woman, Garner, is included in the proceedings, as if to suggest that he is the object of a gaze constructed as at least partially female. Indeed, just as Tramell was literally exposed to the male gaze in the interrogation scene, he is exposed to the female gaze when Roxy, Tramell’s lesbian, leather-clad lover, confronts him as he stands naked in the bathroom. She has apparently watched them have sex; as Roxy asserts, “she likes me to watch.” Again, heterosexual sex functions as a front for lesbian desire: Tramell has been performing for her lover’s gaze. As in Fatal Attraction, stable identification is rendered difficult through constantly shifting gender positions that go beyond mere inversion of roles to deconstruct sexual difference and establish trans-sex identification.

These films thus present a serious challenge to inherited theories of spectatorship. The narrativization of masochism disrupts easy identifications along gender lines. Is a male spectator more likely to identify with a male protagonist like Dulaney or Curran, who, through his participation in masochism, is inhabiting a female subject position? Or with a female protagonist like Carlson or Tramell who takes on the male-sadistic position and who controls the action and the male protagonist both? Are we to identify with figures who duplicate our biological sex or with figures who embody our experience of gender? These films render easy identifications along sex-gender lines problematic, in that they assign and reassign masculine and feminine values and positions regardless of biology.

For women viewing these films, masochistic spectatorial identification with a female protagonist is not experienced as a passive and victimized stance; rather, it is an active, engaged stance taken in opposition to a male position associated with domination and sadism. Such a stance does not liberate women from sign masculine and feminine values and positions regardless of biology. For women viewing these films, masochistic spectatorial identification with a female protagonist is not experienced as a passive and victimized stance; rather, it is an active, engaged stance taken in opposition to a male position associated with domination and sadism. Such a stance does not liberate women from gendered spectatorship, but at the very least, it dislocates identification with the male gaze. Instead, masochistic spectatorship becomes an active position taken in response to and dialogue with images representing gender binaries. Moreover, by highlighting masochistic psychodynamics, these films depict these binaries as constantly shifting and fluid rather than rigidly predetermined and fixed; therefore, although not destroying the binaries per se, these films expose gender as constructed and performed while simultaneously deconstructing heterosexual desire and the controlling male gaze.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Laura Frost and to her work on masochism for the inspiration for this essay. She generously shared her insights, her bibliography, and her time, all of which have had a material impact on the formulation of my ideas. For other noteworthy exceptions, see especially Silverman, “Subjectionity” 2, 8; Silverman “Male” 31–66; Studlar 229–49.

2. See Samois for a feminist defense of sadomasochism for women.

WORKS CITED


Miranda Sherwin is an assistant professor in the English department at the College of Staten Island, CUNY, where she specializes in Women’s Studies. Her book, Confessional Writing and the Twentieth-Century Literary Imagination, is forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan.