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The erotic thriller of the 1980s and 1990s:
Examining the sexuality of the psychopathic
woman in *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct*

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Abstract

This essay explores the figure of the psycho *femme fatale* in *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Basic Instinct* (1992), focusing mostly on how the conservatism of the 80s and 90s and the backlash against independent women affected their representation in the erotic thriller of the end of the century. The essay will also examine the sexuality of the female psychopath as her main weapon to seduce men, as well as what this dangerous sexuality symbolizes in the erotic thriller genre. Firstly, the essay will comment on the figure of the *femme fatale* in the erotic thriller as a product of the backlash ideology of the last decades of the 20th century. Secondly, it will analyze two different types of psycho women, taking as an example Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) and Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone) and focusing on their sexuality and psychopathic characterization as dangerous for men.

Key words: *Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct*, erotic thriller, backlash, sexuality.

Resumen

El objetivo de este ensayo es explorar la figura de la mujer psicópata en las películas *Atracción Fatal* (1987) e *Instinto Básico* (1992), centrándose principalmente en cómo el conservadurismo de los años 80 y 90 y la reacción ideológica contra las mujeres independientes afectó a su representación en el thriller erótico de la época. El ensayo examinará la sexualidad de la psicópata como arma principal para seducir a los hombres, así como lo que esta “peligrosa” sexualidad simboliza en el género del thriller erótico. En primer lugar, el ensayo se centrará en la figura de la mujer fatal como producto del ya mencionado “backlash” de finales del siglo XX. A continuación, se analizarán dos tipos diferentes de mujeres psicópatas, tomando como ejemplo a Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) y Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone) y centrándose en su sexualidad y caracterización psicopática como amenaza para los hombres.

Palabras Clave: *Atracción Fatal*, *Instinto Básico*, thriller erótico, “backlash”, sexualidad.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

*Introduction.....	3
1. Backlash: the situation of women	
• Socio-cultural context of the 80s and 90s.....	5
• Backlash in films.....	7
2. The Erotic Thriller of the 80s/90s	
• The neo-crime/noir thriller: sex meets crime	9
• The neo-femme fatale: sex and crime meet the feminine.....	11
3. The femme fatale/ psycho woman	
• Catherine Tramell and Alex Forrest as seductive psychopaths.....	13
• Fatal desire and the commodification of fatal femininity.....	23
*Conclusion.....	25
*Works cited.....	27
*Films cited.....	28

Introduction:

The *femme fatale* is a very attractive figure, both for critics and the general public at large. This attractiveness is arguably based, at least in part, on its controversial characterization. The construction of the *femme fatale* is connected to historical, social, political and psychological issues. She is a complex figure, the product of two contradictory forces: the advances of second-wave feminism and the backlash ideology of the 1980s and early 1990s. "A powerful counterassault on women's rights", this is how Faludi defines backlash (9), a powerful movement against women that appeared in the 1980s and affected negatively the representation of women in the media.

The rise of second-wave feminism during the 60s and 70s gave women significant victories in the achievement of power. This rising power became more visible in the 70s and even more noticeable in the 80s, when women started to be more independent and liberated from men. More and more women decided to focus on their careers and put their jobs ahead of family and marriage, something that patriarchy was not ready to accept. Another effect of women's liberation was the so-called "masculinity crisis". Men felt intimidated by the growing independence of women. All this needed to be stopped. As a consequence, the media, and more specifically the press, started to spread the false message that single career women were less happy than married women.

The erotic thriller uses the character of the *femme fatale*, who is basically a product of this backlash and the masculinity crisis. She embodies all male fears and anxieties, but at the same time men cannot resist this "fatal attraction" towards this sexy, but deadly, woman. The *femme fatale* resists patriarchy, she does whatever she wants and sleeps with whoever she wants. And this is why she is usually punished or

even killed. The main idea in these films is that the woman who goes against the rules must be punished, and women dedicated to their family must be rewarded.

Basic Instinct (1992) and *Fatal Attraction* (1987) are two of the most successful and critically acclaimed erotic thrillers of all time. *Fatal Attraction* is directed by Adrian Lyne, and tells the story of Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas), who meets the seductive Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) while his wife, Beth, (Anne Archer) is away. Dan and Alex have an affair and when Beth comes back, he wants to break up with Alex. But this is something that Alex is not going to accept. This film caused a huge impact, as audiences flocked to cinemas to watch the terrible consequences of casual sex with dangerous women.

Basic Instinct, directed by Paul Verhoeven, stars Michael Douglas again, this time as Nick Curran, a detective investigating a murder. The prime suspect is Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone), a cold and beautiful novelist with an insatiable sexual appetite. Falling for Catherine, Nick enters the world of the psycho woman. This film caused an even greater stir. Never before had the audience seen such explicit and graphic sex scenes. The figure of Catherine Tramell was especially controversial: some saw her extreme sexuality as the epitome of second-wave feminism, while others viewed her as another product of the backlash ideology.

The aim of this essay is to explore how the backlash shaped the negative representation of the independent woman in the erotic thriller of the 1980s and 1990s as a psychopath who uses her sexuality as a weapon. Many films depicted a new kind of dangerous woman, but the representation of these mad women varies depending on the film's ideology. This essay will analyze and compare two different types of female psychopaths in the most popular erotic thrillers of the genre's heyday, focusing mainly

on their sexuality and psychosis in connection with the backlash ideology. I will start by contextualizing what Susan Faludi calls “the backlash against independent women” as well as how it was introduced in Hollywood cinema. I will also explain the conventions of the erotic thriller and the role the *femme fatale* plays in it. Finally, I will analyze the sexuality and psychopathic characterization of Alex Forrest and Catherine Tramell.

1. Backlash: the situation of women

- **Socio-cultural context of the 1980s and 1990s**

With the advent of Second-wave feminism, women attained important victories in their path towards equality. But then, in the early 80s, another message emerged and it was spread everywhere: women had never been seen so miserable, and it was because of their recently achieved freedom. Professional and single women were exposed to constant mistreatment and criticism on TV, in magazines and advertisements. The media openly stated that women were slaves of their own liberation and the blame was on feminism.

When Reagan came to power, it was the beginning of highly conservative years. Reagan’s political agenda consisted in promoting “family values”, a nostalgic return to the ideal marriage and stereotypical female roles of the 1950s, in which women “willingly choose domestic identities” and “motherhood” (Leonard, 64). The government saw women's increasing power as a national problem. Susan Faludi denounces that “Reagan spokeswoman Faith Whittlesey declared feminism a “straitjacket” for women, in the White House’s only policy speech on the status of the American female population— entitled “Radical Feminism in Retreat”” (4). It was even considered that the increase of crimes committed by women during the 80s, was also the

result of feminism and women's increased freedom. And what is even worse, the U.S. Attorney General's Commission blamed professional women for being responsible for rape incidents since their increased college and work attendance (public spaces) meant more chances to be raped (4). In addition, it was considered that women with high salaries were detrimental for the happy American family.

Women were accused of having too much liberty, but the real situation of women in the 80s was far from equality and true freedom. Women were still facing sex discrimination in the work sphere and were suffering from domestic violence, which was not seen as a crime in many states in the U.S (6). While society, especially men, called them "liberated women", women saw themselves differently. And in the late 80s women's fight for equality had just started.

Faludi defines the backlash as "a powerful counterassault on women's rights", an attack on achievements and hard-won victories of the feminist movement (9). As a result of this backlash, American citizens became persuaded by this idea and saw women's independence as a source of contemporary social and personal problems, from depression to bad complexions.

Male indignation, anger and misogyny were responsible for the emergence of the backlash movement. Men felt that the empowerment of women was threatening traditional patriarchal ideas. Some critics question whether the situation of women in the 21st century constitutes a backlash, or just a neverending resistance to women's progress. It seems that this resistance and fear of female independence have always taken place in the American culture. It can be said that the backlash was not against women's growing freedom, but against the possibility that women could actually achieve it.

In television shows and series the image of women immediately deteriorated: single, career women were transformed into vultures and predators, and in the same way, feminist women were degraded. As the following section will show, this negative portrayal of independent women had its origins in the popular culture and the media which provided “false images of womanhood” (Faludi, 7).

- **Backlash in films:**

The 80s were a tough time for women in the media. Faludi notices that the film industry joined the backlash trend against independent women shortly after the rest of the news media did it (125). She points out that the press contributed to the problems of single women, "by redefining single women's low social status as a personal defect" (111). A large number of newspapers and magazines, among them *The New York Times*, decided to promote the idea that more and more working women were choosing motherhood and family life before it was too late.

Furthermore, Hollywood supported the reactionary idea that women in the 80s felt miserable because they were too independent, too free. It was their independence that had deprived them of motherhood and a husband. The typical portrayal of women in Hollywood cinema was the clash between the independent woman, who must be punished, and the good mother and wife, who wins. At the end of the 80s, actresses were offered only two types of roles in thrillers: the role of the Dark woman or the White woman (133). In *Fatal Attraction* we see that Beth is a perfect representation of the White woman, she is a loving mother and wife. Meanwhile, Alex is the Dark woman, a single career woman who goes crazy eventually and is punished with death.

Faludi states that American filmmakers in late- 80s backlash strived to silence the female voice in films across all genres, and they did it sometimes quite literally (127). For example, in the comedy *Overboard* (1987), Joanna (Goldie Hawn) is a rich, selfish heiress who falls from a yacht and suffers from amnesia. She is rescued by a carpenter (Kurt Russell) who makes her believe that she is his wife, orders her to "Keep her mouth closed" and makes an obedient housewife out of her. This is an example of how a film transforms a "self-willed adult woman to silent (or dead) girl, through coercion, or through the female character's own "choice"" (129). There was a need to return docile and passive female characters into the cinema as well as to give importance to the traditional marriage.



Figure 1: a shot of Joanna as an independent, selfish woman. Figure 2: her transformation, a rich heiress turned housewife.

Women who choose career over family are depicted in these films in a highly unappealing way: they do not usually smile and they look exhausted from overwork. Faludi points out that "women who resist baby fever, by controlling their fertility or postponing motherhood, are shamed and penalized" (146). The comedy *Three Men and a Baby* (1987) may be seen as an attempt at feminist cinema at first. We find three bachelors who are forced to take care of a baby, which is something traditionally done by women. But in fact, the film simply criticizes the behavior of a mother who

abandoned her child in order to focus on her acting career. This is just an example of how pro-family 80s films are full of male anxiety and fear of career women.

There is a remarkable difference between the image of women in the 70s and in the 80s. Hollywood cinema in the 70s showed many independent women in a positive way, and the characters who “went crazy” were actually suburban housewives, who were sick and tired of living under patriarchy (154). By contrast, Susan Faludi notices that in the late 80s, a great number of female characters were tortured, raped and abused in films and TV shows (13). According to the Screen Actors Guild, in the 1990s female characters usually were victims of violence and death (Faludi, 169). This was a sort of metaphorical revenge on women. While the characters of liberated women were being tortured, more “conventional” female characters were portrayed as passive love objects, in order to be an example for female viewers and push women back into their traditional roles. This dichotomy between the White and the Dark Woman could be found across all genres, but it was especially evident in the erotic thriller, the object of this dissertation.

2. The Erotic Thriller of the 80s and 90s

- **The *neo-crime/noir* thriller: sex meets crime:**

Suzanne Leonard explains that what makes *Fatal Attraction* an erotic thriller is the fusion of "graphic sex and imminent danger" (58). The erotic thriller is something in between soft pornography and film *noir*, and these elements can be easily found in *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct*. Sex scenes offer the audience the erotic spectacle, while scenes with violence provide a thrilling and suspenseful experience. The intense bodily pleasures of films like *Basic Instinct*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Body of Evidence* (1993),

Body Heat (1981), *Showgirls* (1995), *Dead Calm* (1989), *Jade* (1995), *The Last Seduction* (1994) and *Wild Things* (1998) are the main characteristic of the erotic thriller. This genre is defined by Linda R. Williams as "noirish stories of sexual intrigue incorporating some form of criminality or duplicity, often as the flimsy framework for on-screen softcore sex" (1). The elevator scene in *Fatal Attraction* is an example of a wild sexual encounter, and the way in which the film plays with light in this scene reminds us of the conventions of film *noir* (Leonard, 58). Dan is trapped between the danger of being caught by his neighbours and the desire to give in to sexual pleasure. David Andrews describes sex as dangerous, and he also explains that graphic sex "serves as a prelude to a more extensive pattern of rage escalating into violence" (59-64). The erotic thriller is a genre that makes sure the audience enjoys both sensations: pleasure and terror. Williams points out that the erotic thriller "should thrill its viewers in a uniquely two-edged way, through narrative suspense and engagement, and through sexual delivery" (25).



Figure 3: a shot of the elevator scene in *Fatal Attraction*. The peculiar use of the light, strong shadows and smog remind us of the conventions of film *noir*.

Erotic thrillers focus on the figure of the *femme fatale* and her extreme, and sometimes deadly, sexuality. The *femme fatale* is a temptress who seduces the male protagonist. Through her fierce sexuality, she controls him and turns him into a victim

of his own sexual desires (Williams, 30). Williams notices that "whilst classic *noir* sex-crime films are underpinned by historical trauma, contemporary erotic thrillers are underpinned by sexual catastrophe" (30). With the popularity of films such as *Basic Instinct*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Single White Female* (1992), *Disclosure* (1994), *Striptease* (1996), *Poison Ivy* (1992) and *Sea of Love* (1989) the erotic thriller became a tremendously popular film genre of the late 80s and 90s. The success of *Fatal Attraction* forged a durable association between the word "fatal" and the genre of erotic thriller, becoming "a metonym not for 'fate', but deadly sex" (Williams, 9).

- **The neo-femme fatale: sex and crime meet the feminine:**

One of the differences between the erotic thriller of the 80s and 90s and classic film *noir* lies in the explicitly sadistic sexual fantasy that the former tries to promote. The *femme fatale* was important in film *noir*, but she becomes even more important in the 90s erotic thriller. The new *femme fatale* fuses crime and sex in one person, while her classic antecedent was a mysterious and visually pleasant figure, as well as the reason for the hero's downfall since she often framed men into committing some crime as a proof of their love. As a result of all these changes, the 90s *femme fatale* becomes post-*femme fatale*. For Linda R. Williams "female types are covertly or overtly trapped by patriarchal authority, the *femme fatale* by her resistance, the *femme attrapee* by her acquiescence" (99). Williams also observes that the *neo-noir femme fatale* is more "castrating" than "phallic" since her *vagina dentata* is constantly hungry for male flesh and sex (100). The *neo-femme* is the explicit version of the classic *femme fatale*, who teased men but never engaged with them in an explicit sex scene.

The 90s *femme fatale* in the *neo-noir* thriller is an extremely sexual antagonist and sexual threat for the male protagonist. In general, *neo-noir* and erotic thrillers emphasize the difficulties of the male protagonist who falls for the sexy deadly woman. These characteristics expose the *femme fatale*'s direct connection to the backlash ideology, and all the controversial issues related to sexually independent woman. This kind of women are dangerous to males, females, families and themselves. The *femme fatale* refuses to behave according to traditional female roles. The idea is that the *femme fatale* is not good and must be inevitably punished for her misconduct with death or pain.

Katherine Farrimond describes the *femme fatale* as someone difficult to define, as a complex and ambivalent figure "in terms of her validity as feminist icon", but at the same time as an icon of female power in Hollywood cinema (1). What makes the *femme fatale* so powerful, is her unconditional sexuality, which not only makes her powerful but also dangerous. The connection between femininity and evil usually go along with the *femme fatale*. She is sexually demanding, she needs to control everything. Modern women feel empowered when they can freely display their sexuality, something for which feminists have been fighting for a long time. The *femme fatale* supports this idea and provides the audience with a spectacle of excessive and enjoyable sexuality.

The *femme fatale* has several readings: she is a product of male anxiety about feminism, or a symbol of female empowerment. She goes against patriarchal standards, and this makes her different from common women, who are unable to do that. However, this revolt can also be explained as the only option the woman has to escape traditional patriarchal roles in a society that enslaves her. Frequently, the *neo-noir* erotic thriller

focuses on the investigation of the *femme fatale*. Her figure is surrounded by mystery, a mystery that should be resolved in order to punish her.

The *femme fatale* of the erotic thriller is sometimes bisexual which offers a hypersexual image of her. Farrimond points out that bisexual behavior in women is highly attractive to the heterosexual male gaze, but it also suggests that she cannot be trusted (136). The *femme fatale* of the 80s and 90s regularly engages in sexual acts with many men, and even women. Films like *Basic Instinct*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Body of Evidence* and *The Last Seduction* associate their *femme fatales* with HIV infection. In this way, sex becomes a source of death, and the *femme fatale* as the one who spreads the infection. However, it is difficult to reject this virus since it has a seductive voice and a beautiful body. In films like *Body of Evidence* and *Basic Instinct*, the body of the fatal woman even becomes the deadly weapon itself. Sex scenes in the erotic thriller are pleasant for the male gaze. In particular, the naked female body plays an important role. The famous crotch scene in *Basic Instinct* demonstrates that just one glance at Catherine's private parts makes all male detectives sweat, a reaction which is meant to mirror the (male) audience's.

3. Femme fatale/ psycho woman

- **Catherine Tramell and Alex Forrest as seductive psychopaths:**

In this part of the essay I am going to analyze two different types of *femme fatale*, focusing mostly on the sexuality and psychosis of Catherine Tramell and Alex Forrest. As has been already explained, *femme fatales* are dangerous women in touch with their sexuality. Even though they all share similar characteristics, there are different types. Psychokillers like in *Basic Instinct* and *Single White Female*, teenage *femmes fatales*

like in *Cruel Intentions* (1999) and *The Crush* (1993), and more traditional *femmes fatales* like in *The Last Seduction*, who just want money and power.

Catherine and Alex are both *femmes fatales*, but they are remarkably different. They are both psychopathic women, but their psychosis presents differences as well, and the same can be said about their sexuality. For Kate Stables, the sexuality of the psycho woman is part of her armoury (in Kaplan “Women in Film Noir”, 165), but the essential characteristic is her psychosis. Not all *femme fatales* are psychopathic women, but those who are, are highly disliked by the audience. Catherine is a cold and calm type of psychopath, she carefully calculates her every step. However, Alex is explosive, she is all emotions, when the time to kill comes she just attacks without having any strategy, which makes her look crazy. As a result of the backlash ideology the figure of the *neo-noir* femme in the Hollywood films of the 80s and 90s became mostly parody and mockery. The representation of Alex Forrest in *Fatal Attraction* is both a classic *femme fatale* of film noir, and a monster of the horror genre. This similarity with the monster can be seen in the final scene. Alex silently enters the family house, dressed in white (resembling a ghost) and armed with a knife. She looks insane and threatening, she is hurting herself with a knife without noticing it. She is a monster ready to attack (the more she approaches the camera, the more emotionally unstable she looks). Later on in the film, when Dan thinks he has finally drowned her, Alex suddenly emerges shouting as a terrible beast.

Alex has a symbolic name, on the one hand it sounds like a male name (which makes her a “phallic” woman). On the other hand Forrest has associations with wildness, danger. Alex can be seen as a masculinized version of the *femme fatale*, she is the one who has the initiative, while Dan remains passive. Alex functions in

opposition to Dan's wife, Beth: the single woman vs the married woman, masculinized vs highly feminine, blond vs brunette.

In both films, the Douglas character is torn between the Dark and the White woman, but no matter how good the White woman is, the male cannot help to fall for the *femme fatale*. In *Basic Instinct* Catherine warns Nick that in her novel he is going to be killed (in real life too) but he still wants to be with her. The first time they have sex, Catherine wants to tie him, she could kill him, but his desire is stronger than his fear of death. When Nick sees the scarf he looks worried, for some seconds it can be noticed that he is scared, as he frantically moves his head when Catherine starts to tie him. She seems to be searching for the ice pick in the sheets, as happened in the first scene of the film, but Nick's attraction to Catherine is so immense that he even risks to be killed if it involves wild sex with her.

In *Fatal Attraction*, Alex warns Dan that if they have an affair it would be considered a crime. She also calls herself "a strange girl", she is a mysterious woman with whom you cannot have only a sexual affair. The role of the *femme fatale* is to seduce males and take them to the dark side. Alex enchants Dan, blows his mind with her voracious sexuality and finally drives him into an affair. She calls him "naughty boy": all the males in erotic noir are naughty, they want to have an extreme sexual experience with a dangerous woman. The same goes for Catherine, her game of seduction makes Nick start to believe every word she says, becoming innocent in his eyes. Nick's friend says that he has lost his mind because of the amazing sex with Catherine.

Sex is very important in the erotic thriller and it is an essential element in the figure of the *femme fatale*. Flirtation and seduction are her weapons to achieve

everything she wants. Both *fatales* like dancing and they seduce their men through dance. Alex brings Dan to the club after spending the night together, and Catherine teases Nick through her erotic dance with Roxy (Leilani Sarelle). As has been said before, sex in the erotic thriller is closely followed by death. This hints at the idea that having sexual encounters with the *femme fatale* is a crime. *Fatal Attraction* includes two scenes with extremely graphic sex in the kitchen and the elevator. In the elevator scene the couple seems to be trapped in a prison because they are framed by the grate, which indicates that they are doing something immoral. The 90s erotic thriller borrows some elements from mainstream pornography *Basic Instinct* starts with an extremely explicit sex scene that could have been taken from a soft porn movie. However, in this scene the spectator is directly introduced to the connection between sex and crime that is only exclusive of the erotic thriller.



Figure 4: the couple framed by the grate shows that sex out of wedlock is a crime.

It is also noticeable how sex and violence are connected through the figure of the *femme fatale*, which encompasses the idea of aggressive sexuality, mystery, danger of death and duality. The sex scenes in *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct* sometimes resemble a wild fight for control. We can see an animalistic kind of sex when Catherine

scratches Nick's back with her nails until he bleeds as if she were a panther. Having sex with the *femme fatale* is like fighting with a wild animal. In the elevator scene, Alex and Dan are like two animals, they move aggressively from one wall to another, and those frenetic moves are also emphasized by the move of the elevator. Similarly, the later scene of the actual fight between them mimics the steps of the sexual act, they roughly use physical force and at the end look at each other extremely exhausted.

Alex likes explicit, rough sex, but she also needs someone to hold during the night. In this way her intentions are clear: she just wants a family. However, Catherine is exceptionally independent, she uses men just to satisfy her sexual needs and then she comes back home alone. Jans B. Wager recognizes two types of noir woman: the *femme attrapée* and the *femme fatale*. What differentiates them, is the resistance of the *femme fatale* to patriarchy and the acceptance of the *femme attrapée* of her role established by patriarchy (Wager, 4). In comparison to Alex, Catherine seems to enjoy her status of single woman and she does not care about having a family, resisting this "patriarchal" idea. If we choose to believe that she killed her parents just for money, we can reach the conclusion that Catherine lacks the capacity to love and as a consequence she cannot have a family.

Alex warns and threatens Dan by saying "I'm not going to be ignored, Dan". Alex does not want to be treated as a slut who has just been used for sexual needs and then thrown in the garbage. Alex shows what is going to happen to the man who is blindly attracted to her just for exciting sex. Leonard observes that at the beginning Alex serves as sexual temptation, providing the male protagonist with a fantasy of wild, unfettered sex, but little by little she transforms into an object of fear and pain (60). This character became so iconic that it has been mentioned in many other movies, such as in

Sleepless in Seattle (1993), where the Tom Hanks character confesses that Alex "scared the shit out" of him, and in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), where Alex is ironically being shown as what might happen to Bridget (Renée Zellweger) if she stays single. The durability of Alex as an icon of popular culture attests to the cultural relevance it had in its heyday.

Regarding the *femme fatale's* physique it is easy to notice that there are some differences between Alex and Catherine. Catherine is a very beautiful woman with an amazing body and angelical face. On the other hand, Alex is an attractive woman but with a more masculine physiognomy than Catherine. Her curly blond hair and strong makeup make her look like Medusa. The first time Alex appears on screen, she is described as a woman who can kill with her gaze, like Medusa does. Traditionally blond women were associated with purity, but the end-of-the-century *femme fatale* is also blonde. What happens is that the *fatale* is disguised. All women in *Basic Instinct* are blonde, even Beth was blonde for some time, suggesting the idea that blond women are psycho killers. Catherine hides her psychopathic killing desires behind her beautiful face and Alex cannot hide her threatening looks by using white clothes. Catherine's angelical voice and vulgar language attract and threaten men around her. Alex is a disguised Dark woman, she is blonde, she usually wears white and light and white colors predominate in her apartment, which may symbolize the loneliness and emptiness of her life. But Alex can also be seen in black, and we can conclude that she is a woman of contrasts and extremes: she is either white or black. She can be flirty but also aggressive, sexual and mortal. Catherine also has a preference for light colors: her car is white, her villa is white and we can see her wearing white in many occasions. In the interrogation scene she is lying to the detectives, but she pretends to be honest. The

white dress she wears suggests she puts up an immaculate façade to the world that tries to conceal her real self.



Figure 5: a shot of Alex in black looking like Medusa who kills with her gaze. Figure 6: Alex in white, she is woman of contrasts.



Figure 7: Catherine prefers white colors, in this shot we can see her in white as well as her white villa. Figure 8: Catherine disguised in white, trying to conceal her real self.

Femmes fatales are intelligent women, usually with studies and careers. Alex is an independent woman with a well paid job so she can afford a car, an apartment and expensive clothes. Catherine is a best-selling author and heiress. She is also very intelligent since she has studied literature and psychology. These women are clever psychopaths who can easily manipulate people to achieve what they need and, in the case of Catherine, remain unpunished. Catherine knows more about Nick than he knows about her, that is why she is always ahead of him. Catherine Tramell is an improved version of Alex, a better and crueler *femme fatale*. While Alex loses her head, dying as a consequence, Catherine has everything carefully planned and keeps calm because she believes in her success.

It is important to discuss Alex and Catherine as psycho killers. They have no compassion for anyone. The cruelty of these women can be seen in the way they kill and the weapon they choose to kill. Alex uses a knife to assault her victims, and Catherine chooses an ice pick; both weapons have a phallic shape . This choice exposes Alex and Catherine as phallic women, although Catherine can also be considered as a castrating woman. The fact that she kills her partner during sex suggests the idea of the *vagina dentata*: her sex delivers death. For Deleyto “the attitude to the castrating woman is ambiguous: she arouses fear of castration but also a simultaneous masochistic desire for death, pleasure, and oblivion”(35). Catherine kills her boyfriends when she becomes sexually bored of them. Another fact that proves Catherine’s status as psychokiller is that her female friends are homicidal murderers: Roxy and Hazel Dobkins killed their families and they did it also with weapons with a phallic form. Similarly, Alex Forrest uses her knife along the film as a tool to harm Dan and Beth. However, she also does something that proves her status of maniacal, lunatic killer: she boils the family’s rabbit, she kills the most innocent creature and she does it without compassion. Alex’s emotional instability, that is, her psychosis, can be seen when she slashes her wrists in a desperate attempt to stop Dan. Her emotional breakdown leads her to slit her wrists and pretends everything is okay, it is not until Dan notices blood on his face, that he realises what she has done. The fact that she does it in the kitchen, may suggest that despite being presented as an independent working woman, her place is in the kitchen, as a reference to unstable housewives always in the kitchen.



Figure 9 and 10: weapons with phallic shape.

Alex is a highly sexual woman who easily seduces Dan, but she can not keep him by her side. On the contrary, Catherine easily keeps Nick, he is crazy about her and he wants to domesticate her as well as constantly have sex with her. The figure of the *femme fatale* has always been connected to the debate of whether she is a product of male fear about female independence or a feminist celebration of female power. This idea of Catherine's "domestication" can be interpreted as an effect of the backlash ideology, there is an urgent need to reeducate her, transform her from liberated woman into a man's possession. Although *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct* are both products of the backlash against women's liberation, *Basic Instinct* seems to have more of a feminist ideology. *Basic Instinct* is more complex and ambiguous, the character of Catherine has many faces and the ending leaves the door open to different interpretations about whether Catherine is guilty or not. In addition, Catherine manages to escape punishment, while Alex does not.

While the classic *fatale* uses sex as a tool to achieve something, the 90s *fatale* also wants to enjoy all sex opportunities she may find. This makes her a promiscuous and "immoral" woman. However, in this sense Alex resembles more the classic *femme fatale*, she uses her sexuality to find a man and try to start a family because she is already 36 and does not have many opportunities to have a baby. *Fatal Attraction* is

100% the result and propaganda of the backlash. It was necessary to shoot a film to warn women about their future if they choose to remain independent and single after a certain age. Neither film nor audience are meant to sympathize with Alex, instead they blame her for being childless and unhappy. Alex is what men fear the most: she is confident at everything she does and she is shameless, this combination (and sexuality) provides her with a huge power, which contrasts with Dan's lack of power to stop her (Dan's impotence establishes him, and Michael Douglas star persona, as a representation of the masculinity crisis of the end of the century). While Alex acts and attacks, Dan desperately tries to defend himself, which reveals his weakness. Alex is a self-confident woman who does not hesitate to pursue her sexual desires, as can be seen in the restaurant scene. While Dan is nervous and cannot break the ice, Alex is the first to start talking about "the next step", which obviously refers to sex. She is again the sexual initiator when she pushes him into her building and then proposes to have sex in the elevator.

Farrimond reads *Basic instinct* as "a lesbian power fantasy" (35). Bisexuality has a negative connotation in movies like *Bound* (1996), *Basic Instinct*, *Showgirls*, *Wild Things* and *Cruel Intentions*. In these films, bisexual women like Catherine Tramell are generally portrayed as being immoral, promiscuous and deceitful. People who can be with women and men at the same time are untrustworthy and even dangerous. At the same time, this duality of female sexual identity reinforces the idea of the *femme fatale* as an enigma. In *Basic Instinct*, Catherine Tramell's bisexuality produces anxiety in Nick, since he cannot understand her true intentions. Does she really like him, or is she just playing with him? Her boyfriend did not want to have sex with her and Roxy because he was afraid of it, afraid of lesbianism. Catherine's unclear behaviour can be

seen in her reactions about the death of her partners. When she discovers that her rockstar boyfriend has been killed she looks unimpressed, while the news about Roxy destroy her emotionally. Farrimond concludes that the bisexuality of the *femme fatale* is both "a further arena for her betrayal, and an area for investigating the *femme fatale*'s secrets, to discover her real desires, and to seek the source of her duplicity" (149). The final scene clearly shows Catherine's duplicity, she is with Nick but she keeps the ice pick under the bed. She may enjoy sex with him today, but she might as well kill him tomorrow.

- **Fatal desire and the commodification of fatal femininity:**

Helen Hanson gives an explanation of the *femme fatale* as a representation of "sexual and social transgressions" through her exploitation of "masculine (phallic) power" and her persistence in seducing all the men she encounters (182). This new heroine is different from the glamorous representation of the classical *femme fatale*. "Fatal desire" and its commodification of "fatal femininity" in the 80s and 90s *neo-noir* thriller's narrative construct female characters as a result of second-wave and post-second wave feminism (Hanson, 142). Examining the erotic thriller, it is important to question how female identity and independence is related to her sexuality. This film genre combines crime and sex, where the female character's sexuality and relation to the crime is investigated. It is necessary for detectives to explore Catherine's sexual life and behaviour in order to find out if she is related to the murder. The *femme fatale* is a sexually liberated woman, which clashes with the conservative ethos of the late 80s and early 90s. Her resistance to adapt to what patriarchy considered traditional femininity was opposed to the family values that the backlash tried to promote. Hanson concludes

that the *femme fatale* becomes a marketing ploy, since the soft-core pornography, she offers makes the film salable and popular (169). What makes the *femme fatale* so fascinating, is that her figure embodies sexual and social powers that common women were denied. For that reason she offers a feminist revenge fantasy, she can take a revenge for all injustices women have suffered. However, these feminist elements do not exclude the crude reality that films of the 80s and 90s presented "forms of female agency as commodities", which shows that the new *femme fatale* is not such a feminist figure as it might seem" (Hanson, 171).

The *femmes fatales* of *Jade*, *Basic Instinct* and *Body of Evidence* are interrogated by the police about their sexual life and preferences. Kate Stables argues that the real central enigma is not the crime, but the *fatale's* sexuality (172). In the interrogation scene, Catherine easily dominates the detectives with her explicit sexual language and by uncrossing her legs. She should be nervous about being there, but ironically they are the ones who are confused, sweating and excited. She is in control of the situation and the one who willingly exposes her body to the male gaze to provoke them.

Catherine's sexuality is like a virus which infects Nick and other women in the film. Catherine enjoys S&M rough sex where she is dominant, she ties up her lovers to the bed, making them vulnerable. In this way she can do with them whatever she wants. Stables points out that the *femme fatale* chooses sadomasochism as her prime sexual practice since it combines sex and death (173). Catherine brings death through sex and her "fatal" sexuality, as happens in other films, such as *Body of Evidence*. The *femme fatale* is a central sexual performer and her naked body becomes a meticulously programmed spectacle. Through the constant exhibition of the *fatale's* nudity, the

female body is objectified, sexualised, and reduced to a “fucking function” (173). This can be seen when Nick describes Catherine as "the fuck of the century".

Apart from the display of her body, the *femme fatale* uses an “excessive” sexual language that suggests the forbidden. She uses provocative and vulgar language, which shocks men and gives her power. For instance, when Catherine is interrogated by the police, she says "I wasn't dating him, I was fucking him". Similarly, the protagonist of *Body of Evidence* confesses "that's what I do- I fuck". This unusual mode of seduction is intensely pleasant for the male character and spectator.

In sum, the *femme fatale* in *Basic Instinct* and *Fatal Attraction* is presented as a sexual spectacle, always ready for the sexual act. The films objectify her by creating a pleasing sexual object always available for the male gaze. The figure of the *femme fatale* embodies masochistic and sadistic male fantasies, which makes her a phallic woman: she is the ultimate male fantasy but also the ultimate threat for the male ego, which becomes “castrated”, victim of his own heterosexuality (Williams, 178).

Conclusion:

This essay has analyzed two erotic thrillers, *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct*, focusing on the sexuality and psychopathic personality of Alex Forrest and Catherine Tramell in the light of the 80s and 90s backlash ideology against the advances of second-wave feminism. The essay has concentrated on explaining the ideology of this backlash, its introduction in mainstream cinema, and the complexity of the *femme fatale*'s sexuality in the erotic thriller of the last two decades of the century.

The erotic thriller entails a clash between the symbolically castrated male and the frivolous *femme fatale*, who uses her sex as a powerful weapon. One of the main

ideas *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct* try to put forward is that unmarried sex is dangerous and may bring catastrophic consequences. The films start with pleasurable sex scenes, but end up with the death or suffering for all protagonists.

The representation of the *femme fatale* in the erotic thriller lies somewhere between misogyny and feminism. Her construction is problematic and difficult to classify because she embodies both female empowerment and patriarchal objectification, liberated sexuality and psychosis. The *femme fatale* is a woman whose body, sexuality and intentions are shaped according to a largely misogynistic ideology. These films (especially *Basic Instinct*) explore the limits of feminist agency as well as women's representation under patriarchy.

The misogyny of these erotic thrillers can be seen in the fact that, in the way they are presented, the male audience might be more interested in watching almost pornographic sex scenes starring the *femme fatale* than in engaging with the narrative of these films. The attempt to introduce extremely graphic sex scenes in the thriller genre, where the woman is the main sexual performer and spectacle reduces the figure of the woman to the object that the man uses to satisfy his sexual desires. The immoral attitude of the *fatale* is opposed to the exemplary attitude of the married woman, who is approved by patriarchy and rewarded with a husband, offspring and a place to call home. In this way, these films try to educate the audience by showing the negative consequences of the feminist revolution. Independent women are characterized as psychopathic killers. *Fatal Attraction's* misogyny and sexism is especially blatant, as it shows that a married man can cheat on his wife, get rid of his lover when the arrangement is no longer convenient for him and get away with it. Alex is presented as a

“crazy bitch”, but her actions are the product of Dan’s behaviour, which is never judged by the film, let alone punished.

Similarly, the feminist notion of women who openly enjoy their sexuality clashes with the misogynistic representation of women's sexuality as always available for the male gaze. The ambiguous construction of the *fatale* as feminist figure can be seen in the way female power is connected to her sexuality, independence and cunning, but this is also combined with a patriarchal view of her as pleasurable, objectified, sexual spectacle. Her “excessive” sexuality is ultimately presented as immoral and the source of all evils, including the woman’s own downfall, painting an ambivalent picture for the modern *femme fatale*, one which seems to normalize and demonize feminist advances at the same time, thus becoming feminist icon and backlash figure at once.

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