

I'M A MARRIED MAN



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I'm a Married Man, 2021, video installation, 4:40 min.

I first watched Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* (1987) when I was 16 years old and I remember feeling repulsed by Michael Douglas' character. I was insulted that the film expected me to relate to a man who had cheated on his wife and somehow became the victim of his mistress's sexual scorn. There is one scene in *Fatal Attraction* that particularly horrifies me, and which epitomises the treatment of "predatory women" in film. After repeated attempts to cut contact with Glenn Close's character, Douglas meets her in a train station and berates her.

"Is this what you want to talk about, our imaginary love affair."

Even after she reveals to him that she is pregnant, he continues to condescend and gaslight her, calling her "sick" and telling her she "needs to see a shrink". Finally, he demands that she does not carry her pregnancy to full term because they "will have to live with this for the rest of their lives."

After my initial viewing of *Fatal Attraction*, I became obsessed with Douglas' filmography, particularly his roles throughout the '80s and '90s. I noticed a pattern of him selecting roles similar to the one he played in *Fatal Attraction*. He belittles, patronises and invalidates the experiences of the "predatory woman" female lead, the counterpart to his "everyman" persona. As film critic Rob Edelman states in regard to Douglas' choice in film roles:

"...he personifies the contemporary Caucasian middle-to-upper class American male who finds himself the brunt of female anger because of real or imagined sexual slights. He is the everyman who must contend with and be victimised by these women and their raging psychotic sexuality."^[1]

The "predatory woman" recurs across film history. She is often associated with the femme fatale and is characterised by her overt sexuality, extreme displays of emotion and assertiveness against the male gaze. This archetype is derived from the ancient Greek mythology of Medusa; a monstrous Gorgon with the ability to turn her onlookers to stone. A crucial aspect of the Medusa mythology is that the woman is punished for her defiance in response to male characters. While her ability to "look" makes men fear her, it is also her demise as she is ultimately beheaded by Perseus who uses a shield to directly avoid her stare. The trope of the "predatory woman" being punished by a man is also common in film history. Naomi Segal aptly says:

"Of course, they (femme fatale) may feed a narcissistic fantasy in their female viewers, but, more particularly, they license violence to them, by suggesting that the motive has originated in them. But it is essentially a fantasy of self-justification for the male violence that murders."^[2]

I'm a Married Man is an immersive video installation that appropriates imagery from a collection of Douglas' films including *War of the Roses* (1989), *Disclosure* (1994), *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Basic Instinct* (1992). By cutting and reordering the dialogue of each of Douglas' respective characters into a reimagined narrative devoid of the "predatory woman" female lead; the video is examining the role that the Medusa mythology and the dominant coding of the "male gaze" has played in undermining female subjectivity in film. Without the Medusa-like female leads present in this work, the conversation exchanged between Douglas' characters emphasises the disparaging and misogynistic manner in which assertive women are addressed. The nonsensical and chauvinistic dialogue subverts the traditional male role in cinema – rather than Douglas diminishing, humiliating and manipulating his

“predatory woman” leads, he diminishes, humiliates and manipulates himself.

The reflective surfaces I have used to project the video work into pay homage to Perseus and his shield. The cast-off reflections from these surfaces create a conglomerate (some coherent, some indecipherable) of Douglas’s designed to disorientate and overwhelm the viewer. You are trapped within the tyranny of Douglas’ “everyman” facade and unable to escape his inane and hostile ramblings.

Accompanying the installation is a segment of audio from the opera *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini. It follows the story of Cio Cio San, a young Japanese woman who is abandoned by her American naval officer fiancée, concluding with her suicide. *Madama Butterfly* is a heavily reoccurring motif in *Fatal Attraction*, with connections drawn between both female characters and their seemingly justified condemnation for the wrongdoings perpetrated against them by a man.

In presenting an alternative narrative to the traditional “everyman”, embodied by Douglas, *I’m a Married Man* not only disrupts the harmful manner in which sexually assertive women are coded in cinema, but also the ways in which we are accustomed to interacting with presentations of these women. In light of movements such as #MeToo, and the under representation of female driven stories in film, *I’m a Married Man* encourages viewers to reconsider how they relate to coded power dynamics in cinematic media.

Chloe Nolan

References:

^[1] Edelman, Rob; Unterburger, Amy L. (Ed.) (1997). *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers: Actors and Actresses* (3rd Ed.), pg. 347-348. St. James Press, USA.

^[2] Segal, Naomi. (2017). *The Femme Fatale: A Literary and Cultural Version of Femicide*. pg. 103. Birkbeck University of London, UK.

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