CREATING DISCUSSION: AN AUTEUR ANALYSIS OF FILMS

DIRECTED BY ADRIAN LYNE

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This thesis examines the various "signature" threads that are present within the "oeuvre" of the Hollywood filmmaker Adrian Lyne. The goal of this thesis is to showcase both how and why Lyne can be thought of as an auteur and to open up his films to new and previously unexplored meanings. Lyne's eight feature films are analyzed in-depth individually and in comparison to one another from a variety of theoretical frameworks and points of focus in each of the body chapters.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is the product of so many extraordinary forces. First, I will always fondly remember the COUNTLESS nights that I struggled to write it while watching Texas Rangers Baseball games, *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (2015), *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), and *Dancing With The Stars* (Val Chmerkovskiy videos on YouTube got me through some of the darkest times of my writing process). Second, this thesis would not have been possible without the COUNTLESS hours I spent talking about it (in person and on the phone) with my mother (first and foremost), father, uncle, chihuahuas, committee members, best friends, and fellow graduate students (you all know who you are). Finally, my parents’ and professors’ encouragement and support is the literal foundation on which this thesis was written and I hope to one day repay them for everything that they have given me. In the end, it should be “acknowledged” that this thesis is dedicated to ALL of my sources of inspiration and support. I thank you ALL with everything that I am and everything that I hope to become.

On a (more) personal note - In writing this thesis, my love of film (and the study of it) grew so much more than I anticipated and I learned more about myself than I ever thought was possible. This thesis represents everything that I love about film, critical-cultural studies, and the human condition. I feel very privileged and grateful that I was given the opportunity to write it. After completing this final step of my Master’s degree, I now know (with complete certainty) that I would gladly give many more years of my life to the pursuit of learning and writing about films (which is ultimately the plan).
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The study of film authorship in the form of auteur theory first emerged in the late 1940s and the early 1950s in Postwar France. One of the original objectives of auteur theory was to recognize previously neglected directors (mostly Americans making commercial films) and to argue that their work was worth studying in depth (Bywater and Sobchack, p. 57). The British-born Adrian Lyne is an example of a more contemporary Hollywood director whose work has often been ignored and dismissed by critics and scholars up to this point. Consequently, adapting and applying auteur theory is particularly useful in attempting to conduct a more complex and in-depth examination of Lyne’s films and their various unifying and connective threads, which is the purpose of this thesis.

Interestingly, despite having directed some of the most controversial and talked about Hollywood films of the last three decades, there has yet to be a definitive study of Lyne as an auteur. My thesis thus seeks to argue both how and why Lyne can be thought of as an auteur and to explore what kinds of readings of his films can develop when they are analyzed through the auteur theory framework. As with many other auteur studies, Lyne’s body of work is analyzed as a whole, as what can be considered an “oeuvre,” with several identifiable stylistic and thematic traits or “signatures” (Bordwell, p. 211). By taking this approach, I aim to give Lyne’s films more in-depth scholarly analysis than they have previously been afforded and to argue that an examination of his films’ common elements is conducive to making meanings out of them that have yet to be fully realized or considered in previous works of criticism.

To put this another way, the main goal of this thesis is to argue that Lyne’s films can be seen as open to a range of meanings when analyzed through the auteur theory framework.
Similar to the subversive and negotiated readings of his films that I am arguing for an understanding of, Lyne once said the following about the motivation behind his films, “I like movies that create discussion; I love it when they [audiences] haven't forgotten about your movie by dinnertime and they're still arguing about it the next day – that's what a movie should do, it should create discussion” (unreported source on imdb.com). Drawing on Lyne’s own description of his work, I also show how his films can be seen as “creating discussion” by consistently attempting to question and negotiate with dominant ideological norms around gender, sexuality, and class. The specific ways in which his films attempt to engage with various ideological issues is outlined in the chapter breakdown below and is the basis for the following chapters’ analyses.

Before conducting an auteur analysis of his films however, this introductory chapter first discusses how auteur theory is being utilized in the formulation of my analysis of Lyne’s films then moves on to a discussion of the conditions in which Lyne was working in Hollywood as well as offer an examination of how he formed his particular style and approach to filmmaking over the course of his career.

Understanding Lyne as an Auteur

Defining who or what an auteur is can be a somewhat complex and contradictory process as the term has evolved over time and can have different connotations depending on the context. Therefore, it is important that I distinguish what I mean by the term auteur and what kind of auteur analysis I intend to conduct of Lyne’s films from the outset.

The notion that the director was the auteur or “author” of a film was first formulated by a group of film critics writing for the French film periodical Cahiers du Cinema (in the late 1940s and the early 1950s), who referred back to an essentially literary and romantic conception of the
director as an artist and the “central source of meaning in a text” in an attempt to argue for a recognition of the artistry in the filmmaking process (Astruc and Truffaut). However, since 1967, when the French film theorist Roland Barthes announced “the death of the author” and the “birth of the reader,” there have been several distinct shifts and theoretical discussions around film authorship that have contributed to an understanding of what an auteur is today (Barthes quoted in Heath, pp. 142-147). More specifically, Barthes’ essay “The Death of the Author” prompted a shift to “post-structuralist” auteur theory throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, which could be described as the attempt to discover the discursive and semiotic organization that drives a text, rather than an analysis of how the text is a site of unified meanings that stem from an authoritative source i.e. “the auteur” (Caughie, p. 2).

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s there has been a “rebirth” of auteur studies in the work of various scholars, which is particularly useful in arguing for an understanding of how Lyne can be thought of as an auteur in that his career coincided with the era’s “reconstruction” of auteur studies (MacCabe and Andrew). Auteur studies also returned to academic respectability with this “rebirth,” which was constituted by an argument that individuals can make a difference while still taking into consideration the multiple forces at work within a text to form a blend of traditional auteur studies with the early post-structuralists’ works (Andrew). For example, Timothy Corrigan’s *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (1991) is one source from the “rebirth” period of auteur studies that informs this thesis’ understanding of Lyne as an auteur. Corrigan summarizes the evolution of auteurism in the following way,

Despite their differences, theories and practices of auteurism from Astruc to Peter Wollen to Foucault and Stephen Heath, from John Ford to Jean-Luc Godard share basic assumptions about the auteur as the structuring principle of enunciation, an organizing expression of one sort or another. Whether one locates the auteurial [sic] presence as a source for stylistic or other textual consistencies and variations or as a figurative authority supplanting a lost or “dead” source (as Barthes would say), in the form of a
textual enunciation, the place of the auteur within a textual causality describes a way of organizing spectatorial positions in a transcendent or trans-subjective fashion. (p. 102)

Although he argues that auteur studies can be somewhat reductive in being “trans-subjective,” Corrigan also suggests that the auteur can be thought of as a “structuring principle,” and therefore serve as the basis for one’s analysis of a particular filmmaker’s work, which is one way of describing Lyne’s function as an “auteur” within this study (p. 103).

In addition to acting as a “structuring principle” in academic studies, Corrigan also posits that the auteur has become a commercial property, a kind of “brand” or “logo,” a form of advertisement that allows certain films to stand out in an international market of images (p.105). ¹ Consequently, Corrigan said the following in relation to how contemporary auteur studies have come to transition their focus and attention to “the commerce of auteurism” and the “branding” of the auteur,

> The international imperatives of post-modern culture have made it clear that commerce is now much more than just a contending discourse: if, in conjunction with the so-called international art cinema of the sixties and seventies, the auteur had been absorbed as a phantom presence within the text, he or she has rematerialized in the eighties and nineties as a commercial performance of *the business of being an auteur [sic]*. (p. 104)

Describing Lyne as “rematerializing” as an auteur within this study correlates with Corrigan’s above description of how one can view an auteur within the contemporary film culture as a “brand” or “commercial performance,” who is now commonly identified as a primary creative force behind a text in the marketing of their films. To extend his point even further, Corrigan argues that the “branding” of certain filmmakers has resulted in the contemporary status of auteurs as stars or “auteur-stars” (p. 105).

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¹ The marketing for many of the mainstream auteurs also suggests their “brand” by providing a continuation of the characters and filmic worlds.
Examples of so-called “auteur-stars” include directors who emerged with the New Hollywood wave of filmmakers in the late 1960s and early 1970s such as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese. Unlike many of the New Hollywood directors however, Lyne did not direct any franchise films or trilogies, such as George Lucas with *Star Wars* and Steven Spielberg with *Indiana Jones* (released throughout the early 1970s to the late 1980s and resurging in today’s film culture), which can be seen as one reason why a contemporary auteur study of his work has yet to be conducted. As Corrigan argues, these directors were provided with a more immediate and direct link between a particular set of their films as they are all grouped under the same labels in their marketing (p. 105). This allows for the recognition of their common elements, including the director, to emerge more overtly. The films of Lyne’s that were released in the 1990s do include a tagline in the trailer and on the posters that do recognize and “brand” them as “A film by Adrian Lyne,” but his films’ common elements have yet to be studied in-depth up to this point, despite being identified as “his products” in their marketing campaigns.

Like Corrigan’s theories, Colin MacCabe’s conception of an auteur also informs this thesis’ understanding of Lyne as an auteur. In his 1989 article “The Revenge of the Author,” MacCabe attempts to redefine what an auteur is for contemporary readers through an acknowledgement of the various ways the term has evolved since its inception. MacCabe argues that an auteur can be understood today as a “contradictory movement” that inhabits a “plurality” or “multiplicity of positions,” rather than how the term has been traditionally applied to describe an auteur as “a homogenous, autonomous, and totalizing subject” (p. 37). Moreover, MacCabe argues that “the author finds him-or-herself in their audience,” and therefore, an “infinite”
number of meanings can be made out of a text when looked at by different viewers in different contexts from various subject positions (p. 40).

Decades before Corrigan and MacCabe, in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1972) film theorist Peter Wollen cautioned against constraining one’s interpretation of a particular filmmakers’ work to a single aspect, such as the director, like the more traditional auteur critics in France or Andrew Sarris in America in the early 1960s (Wollen quoted in Pramaggiore and Wallis, p. 400). Wollen warns against focusing only on readings of particular filmmakers’ work that can be linked back to some notion of what a director meant to convey, arguing that any given text may exceed the intentions of the person or people who created it (Wollen quoted in Pramaggiore and Wallis, p. 400). Drawing on Wollen along with Corrigan and MacCabe’s arguments then, this thesis avoids conducting a purely traditional auteur study by treating Lyne as a more of a “catalyst” for the analysis of his films rather than the “sole creator of meaning” behind them (Wollen quoted in Pramaggiore and Wallis, p. 398; Stoddart, p. 39). My analysis of Lyne’s films is therefore not meant to be exhaustive, but I do aim to explore his oeuvre in relation to a variety of identifiable patterns and connective “signature” threads.

In conclusion to this section, it could be argued that an auteur study and in-depth examination of Lyne’s films up to this point would have been somewhat limited given how few films he has directed and because the theories employed to analyze his films in this thesis were still developing and evolving when his films were first released (i.e. post-structuralist auteur theory, post-modernism, queer theory, and post-feminism). Therefore, it could also be argued that an auteur study of his films was not possible until recently, given that these theoretical frames are necessary to employ when analyzing the particular complex and contradictory way Lyne’s films attempt to negotiate with various ideological norms and ideals.
Interestingly, there are numerous other possible reasons why Lyne has yet to be studied as an auteur but there are several specific ones that have been suggested throughout this section that are expanded upon in the following section in order to highlight his films’ particular position in film and cultural studies up to this point. The following section also discusses the highly politically charged atmosphere in which Lyne’s films were made as well as establishes the validity of an auteur study based around his films by showcasing how much of an impact his films have had on today’s film culture and viewers, despite their many limitations and criticisms.

The Cultural Importance and Influence of Lyne’s Work

Historically, Lyne’s films have only ever been written about individually or in small groups (and a comprehensive examination of his films has never been the primary focus of an in-depth academic work such as a thesis, dissertation, or book-length study). Lyne directed a total of eight feature films between 1980 and 2002: *Foxes* (1980), *Flashdance* (1983), *9½ Weeks* (1986), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990), *Indecent Proposal* (1993), *Lolita* (1997), and *Unfaithful* (2002). Lyne’s relatively small number of films as well as the amount of time in between each of their releases is perhaps one main reason why his films have yet to be written about comprehensively. Lyne claims that he has chosen to make so few films because he will only take on directing projects that he has a passion or belief in, and he also has stated that he needs a break in between each (Emery). In contrast to Lyne for example, Alfred Hitchcock directed fifty-three feature films in just over fifty years (an average of one per year between 1925-1976) and his collection of films served as the basis for auteur theory, along with several other classical Hollywood directors’ work (Pramaggiore and Wallis, p. 401).
As an extension of this point, it is important to note that Lyne’s films were all written by other screenwriters and that many of them are adaptations or remakes. This is another possible reason why he has yet to be written about as an “auteur” as traditionally auteur studies were based on directors who also often wrote their own screenplays (Stoddart, p. 39). Additionally, many of Lyne’s films were written or produced by women, which is important to acknowledge when considering why his work has yet to be written about extensively given that one of the main critiques of his films is that they can be read as attempting to reinforce patriarchy and dominant ideological values rather than negotiate with them (Faludi). For example, the producer Sherry Lansing worked with Lyne on Fatal Attraction and Indecent Proposal, which was co-authored and adapted for the screen by the female screenplay writer Amy Holden Jones. Sarah Kernochan and Patricia Louisiana Knop were two of the female writers who co-authored the screenplay adaptation of Elizabeth McNeill’s memoir for 9½ Weeks, and many of the theme songs in Lyne’s films are performed by women, which results in a foregrounding of the female voice and perspective. Examples include Donna Summer’s “On The Radio” in Foxes and Irene Cara’s “Flashdance…What a Feeling” in Flashdance. While a woman’s involvement in a production does not automatically qualify it as a “feminist” text per se, it is important to recognize that women were an integral part of many of Lyne’s films’ productions and their presence does influence and add to how one can read his films in terms of how they explore issues around gender, female sexuality, and identity.

When one considers their various associations with women, it could also be argued that women are the target audience for Lyne’s films, as they all focus on female subjectivity and

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2 9½ Weeks was adapted from a memoir of the same name written by Elizabeth McNeil while Indecent Proposal and Lolita were adapted from novels written by Jack Engelhard and Vladimir Nabokov, respectively. Unfaithful is a remake of the French New Wave director Claude Chabrol’s 1969 feature film La Femme Infidèle (The Unfaithful Wife).
agency in some way. These aspects will be discussed further in the following chapters, but it is Lyne’s films’ association with women (both on and off the screen) that is another possible reason why his films have yet to be written about or studied in-depth. For example, in contrast to Lyne, many of the mainstream Hollywood films that have emerged in the last few decades are largely patriarchal and somewhat more limited in terms of how women are represented. As such, it has been observed by various theorists over the years (such as feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”) that Hollywood texts are traditionally more male-centered and primarily aimed at male viewers. Therefore, Lyne’s films are important to acknowledge in that they diverge from other mainstream Hollywood texts in their attempts to offer more interesting and diverse narratives for and about women.

Although Lyne’s films do attempt to represent women in relatively complex and interesting ways, it is also important to note that they lack any racial or ethnic diversity. Consequently, his films’ largely Eurocentric worldview is another possible reason why they have been ignored and dismissed in the past by scholars and critics. For example, countless contemporary auteur studies have recognized many of the New Hollywood directors’ films for their emphasis on issues around race and ethnic identity (Edgerton and Marsden). The focus on these issues has been identified as one of the many “personal stamps” that are arguably present across the various filmmakers’ bodies of work (Cavallero). Examples include the New

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3 See co-editors Gary Richard Edgerton and Michael T. Madsen’s 1997 book In the Eye of the Beholder: Critical Perspectives in Popular Film and Television for a comprehensive list of “auteur studies” about Coppola, Scorsese, and various other prominent emigrant directors who began working in Hollywood throughout the mid-to-late twentieth century and whose films have enjoyed much commercial and critical success (p. 236).

4 In his 2011 book Hollywood's Italian American Filmmakers: Capra, Scorsese, Savoca, Coppola, and Tarantino, Jonathan J. Cavallero examines the work of the aforementioned Italian-American directors and how their Italian heritage is implemented in their films. See his study for further reading on how Coppola and Scorsese have approached the topic of race relations and ethnic identity in their work over the course of their long and illustrious careers as well as to further understand how their work differs from Lyne’s and why their focus on race and ethnicity helped to propel their films into the spotlight with viewers and critics.
Hollywood directors Francis Ford Coppola (i.e. *The Godfather Part I* and *Part II* in 1972 and 1974) and Martin Scorsese (i.e. *Mean Streets* in 1973), whose films explicitly address issues around race and ethnicity in that they often feature narratives about Italian-American immigrants as they attempt to rise up and achieve their own versions of “The American Dream.” These characters’ stories have seemingly made a lasting impact on film and viewing culture as the vast assortment of these directors’ rebellious ethnic anti-heroes have been widely celebrated as pop culture icons for generations of mainstream audiences to root for and identify with (for nearly fifty years now).

Similar to Coppola and Scorsese, many of the other New Hollywood directors (i.e. Spielberg and Lucas) have been recognized for infusing their work with signifiers of their own racial and ethnic identities to present a more “particular” and “personalized” worldview (rather than a “universal” or elitist one), which is what can make Lyne’s films’ focus on issues surrounding “whiteness” appear somewhat more limited and reductive in comparison. However, Lyne’s films are similar to those of the New Hollywood directors in that they can also be seen as politically charged in how they attempt to challenge the ways that gender, sexuality, and class are represented for mainstream audiences. To emphasize this point further, it is Lyne’s films’ consistent attempts to challenge and undermine various Eurocentric ideals and heteronormative constructs that can be seen as the overarching “signature” trait present across his body of work.

Similar to the era in which the New Hollywood filmmakers emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Lyne began his career in Hollywood in a decade of tremendous change. Comparable to the more cynical and convoluted films created by the New Hollywood directors, the turbulent atmosphere in which Lyne’ films were first produced and released can also be seen as significantly contributing to how limited and narrow the writing about his work has been up to
this point. For example, the start of Lyne’s career coincided with several major socio-political and cultural changes including the rise of the Moral Majority, an emphasis on conservatism and “family values” propagated by the reactionary politics of then President Ronald Reagan, the “backlash” against second-wave feminism, and the AIDS epidemic (to name just a few). Lyne’s career also began amid the rise of MTV and music videos, which caused a shift in the aesthetic and kinds of techniques being utilized in the film (and television) industry including jump cuts, non-linear editing, and the prominent role of popular music soundtracks in the marketing and design of Hollywood feature films (Wyatt, pp. 21-64).\(^5\) Furthermore, the escalating economic stakes in the 1980s also led to changes in how Hollywood executives approached the marketing and distribution of films in an attempt to compete with the rise of cable-television and home-viewing, which came about with the emergence and growing popularity of Direct-to-Video releases, VCRs, and video stores (Faludi, p. 113). Consequently, along with understanding how these extra-textual factors shaped the writing about his films, these changes in society and culture are important to acknowledge when conducting a comprehensive study of Lyne’s films as they each profoundly contributed to the style, themes, and ideological issues explored within them, which is also discussed in the following chapters in more detail in various ways.

In addition to recognizing the radical changes in political attitudes and popular/viewing culture, it is important to acknowledge the specific industrial context in which Lyne was working when making meaning out of films and in interpreting their ideological implications. For example, Lyne spent the majority of his career working within the confines of the Hollywood studio system, and as a result, his films’ “risqué” and explicit depiction of sex and issues around

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\(^5\) With the emergence of MTV, a new kind of “consumer”/viewing culture was created as the channel/music videos were primarily aimed at young adults/teens who were anti-establishment and anti-authority. The aesthetic that began to emerge in music videos also reflected such rebellious and experimental attitudes.
gender and sexuality were somewhat compromised by the pressure to garner R-ratings in order to reach a more widespread audience (thereby becoming potentially more financially successful at the box office). In other words, Lyne’s creative and artistic “freedom” (or “personal vision” for his films) was significantly complicated by the Hollywood studio system’s largely “puritanical” ratings standards, which were partly based on target audiences’ reactions. For example, the ending of Fatal Attraction was “infamously” reshot after several test audiences were reportedly outraged to the point of screaming obscenities at the screen and walking out (Faludi, p. 112). Consequently, the restrictive effects of the Hollywood industry’s standards and expectations on Lyne’s work is important to take into consideration in conducting a comprehensive and post-structuralist auteur study of his films, as it is another factor that contributes to understanding his

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6 The original ending climaxes with a scene in which Alex (Glenn Close) chooses to take her life. The sequence begins with the cops coming to arrest Alex’s married lover Dan (Michael Douglas) for her murder, and then shows his distraught wife Beth (played by Anne Archer) frantically flipping through the pages of their phone book looking for the number of the family lawyer, before she fortuitously finds a tape (given to Dan in an earlier scene) on which Alex confesses that she will kill herself if Dan ever leaves her. Beth then rushes off to bring the tape to the police station in order to prove her husband’s innocence. The final image is a flashback to Alex in her bathroom, dressed in all white (to symbolize purity and innocence) and listening to “Madama Butterfly” (from the tragic 1904 Giacomo Puccini opera of the same name – which also plays in an earlier scene in the film to “foreshadow” her doomed relationship with Dan), before she slashes her throat with a knife that Dan left on her kitchen counter, in order to frame him for her “murder.” Although her plan fails, the original ending can be read as a moment of “textual negotiation” in that it encourages the viewer to sympathize with Alex’s desperation and self-destruction, which gives the film a potentially more “subversive” reading overall. For example, in taking her own life, Alex is given one final moment of agency as a women in control of her own death, like the archetypal “femme fatales” of classical Hollywood film noirs that were popular in the post-war years. In this way, the original ending is also akin to the final shot of director Paul Verhoeven’s 1992 film Basic Instinct, in which it is left of to the viewer to decide whether or not Catherine (Sharon Stone) is the “real” killer in the film (the film concludes with a fades to black and then a quick fade back in to a slow downward tracking shot, which reveals the iconic ice pick lying on the floor under Catherine’s bed). Film critic Roger Ebert’s review of the film comments on how incongruent the editing of certain scenes is near the end of the film due to the reshoot. See his review in Todd Rendleman’s book Rule of Thumb (2012) in the chapter “Close to Ebert” for further details and analysis about the film’s original ending in comparison to the one used in the film. The original ending can also be viewed on the 1992 VHS and LaserDisc versions of the film released by Paramount or the 2002 Special Edition DVD for further reference (and interestingly, the film’s theatrical release in Japan included the original ending). The footage has most recently been posted in its entirety on YouTube by various users and can be found at the following web address (for free), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GY_NQK7rJrY
film’s particular representation of issues around dominant ideological issues of the time period in which they were first released through to today.\(^7\)

Most significantly perhaps, Lyne’s films have often been ignored or dismissed by various scholars and critics who have labeled them as “exploitative” and as focusing too much on “style” rather than “substance” (Faludi and Wyatt respectively). I am thus arguing for a kind of “de-labeling” of Lyne’s films in contrast to these kinds of readings. Specifically, Susan Faludi and Justin Wyatt’s case studies of Lyne’s films are necessary to discuss as a way of showcasing the kinds of readings that I argue against throughout this thesis and to give my study of his work further contextual support.

In her seminal 1991 work *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Faludi dedicates an entire chapter to discussing the Hollywood film industry’s role in the wider cultural “backlash” against second-wave feminism, including case studies of several films in the 1980s directed by Adrian Lyne.\(^8\) In the chapter entitled “Fatal and Fetal Visions: The Backlash in the Movies,” Faludi suggests that Lyne’s first four films are “exploitative” and “reactionary” in that they reinforce negative stereotypes and images of women, particularly career women, or women who are active and independent (p. 113). However, the main weakness of Faludi’s

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\(^7\) It is interesting to note that after reshooting the ending, *Fatal Attraction* went on to be the most financially successful and critically acclaimed film of Lyne’s career (receiving 6 academy award nominations - including his only Best Director nomination). *Fatal Attraction* was also among the highest grossing films of 1987 worldwide, earning $320,145,693.00 at the box office (boxofficemojo.com). The “success” of the film is somewhat ironic considering that it was not the version that was originally meant to be screened, which further supports the argument that he “chose” to conform to mainstream audiences and executives’ expectations to make money, rather than his own artistic vision. However, an analysis of the original ending also supports the argument that his films attempt to negotiate with female agency/subjectivity as well as issues around gender and sexuality in somewhat ambiguous (or complex) and contradictory ways, which is synonymous with this study’s overarching argument about his films ideological implications.

\(^8\) Lyne seems to have been acutely aware of how influential Faludi was in shaping the early critical discourse about his films as he attempted to “poke fun” at her book in *Indecent Proposal*. In one brief shot halfway through the film, a nameless secretary at Demi Moore’s characters’ realty office can be seen reading the book, thereby suggesting that Lyne was attempting to “playfully” respond to Faludi’s reactionary and negative comments about his work.
argument is that she primarily relies on a discussion of test audiences’ reactions to *Fatal Attraction* and on citing several historical real-life statistics about marriage and career women to make her argument, rather than on textual analyses of Lyne’s films themselves to support her points. Her approach thus ignores various moments of “slippage” or ambiguity that would prove her reading of his films to be rather reductive, which is explored in more detail throughout my thesis.

Similarly, film scholar Justin Wyatt discusses Lyne’s first four films in a somewhat dismissive and reductive way in his 1994 book *High Concept*, which is a term that refers to films that have a story that can be reduced to a single catch phrase or tag line (p. 7). Wyatt argues that high concept films became prevalent in the 1980s as a direct result of several industrial and technological changes in Hollywood and filmmaking, such as the emergence of MTV and the ensuing popularity of music videos. According to Wyatt, high concept films can be differentiated from other mainstream and independent film texts through their emphasis on “excessive style” and their integration with marketing and merchandising (p. 7). Throughout his book, Wyatt suggests that several of Lyne’s earliest films are texts that quintessentially exhibit the high concept aesthetic, including *Flashdance* and *9½ Weeks* in particular. One of the many critiques or drawbacks that Wyatt argues is present in many high concept films is a weakening of identification with character and narrative, which he applies to describe the construction of Lyne’s narratives and several of his films’ protagonists (p. 60). Like Faludi then, Wyatt’s reading of Lyne’s films ignore some of the complexity that they have in terms of narrative and character development, which I also address in more depth in the following chapters.

On the other end of the spectrum, film critic Roger Ebert’s reviews of Lyne’s films often defend his focus on “excessive style.” In Todd Rendleman’s 2012 book about the life and work
of the American film critic, *Rule of Thumb: Ebert at the Movies*, there is an entire chapter dedicated to Ebert’s reviews of Lyne’s first four films entitled “Close to Ebert” in which the style and mise-en-scène is analyzed in detail. As Rendleman points out, Ebert is one of the few critics (or scholars) to have written about Lyne’s films as they came out and evolved over time, which is perhaps why his reviews often acknowledge Lyne’s previous films for comparison and why he chose to go “beyond appearances” (or beyond the surface level elements) to give more in-depth readings of them (Rendleman ch. 3). Drawing upon his reviews, Rendleman’s chapter is specifically centered around Ebert’s theories on the relationship between style and content. He begins the chapter with a discussion of “Ebert’s Law,” which is “a movie isn’t just what it’s about, it’s how it is what it’s about” (ch. 3). Through Ebert’s Law, Rendleman and Ebert acknowledge that Lyne’s emphasis on “style” reinforces the themes and ideological issues he is attempting to explore and that the complex relationship between style and content is a key aspect to understanding his work. This is in direct contrast to Wyatt’s and Faludi’s argument that Lyne’s films distract from identification with the characters and the development of the narrative, and that his focus on style connotes a lack of “vision” or “substance” (Wyatt, p. 60). In other words, one could describe Lyne’s films as focusing on the “visual language” of the cinematic medium to communicate the narrative, character motivation, and ideology.

Drawing on Ebert’s reviews, Rendleman describes Lyne as a director who “is drawn to psychosexual tragedies” and suggests that “his films are often marked with a distinctive sensual pallet,” which correlates with this thesis’ argument that Lyne’s films have distinct connective threads that can be teased out and analyzed across his body of work (ch. 3). Also in line with this thesis’ arguments, Ebert and Rendleman focus on Lyne’s films themselves as the basis for their readings, rather than relying solely on a discussion of extra-textual elements, like Faludi
and Wyatt. Also unlike Faludi and Wyatt, who both attempt to argue that Lyne’s films are symptomatic of the cultural and industrial context in which they were made, Ebert and Rendleman argue that Lyne’s films are more “open” and represent a negotiation or questioning of the values and ideals that were dominant throughout the 1980s, rather than a mere reflection of them. Lastly, according to Rendleman, Ebert often describes Lyne’s films as “rare” and “thoughtful” in their attempts to showcase various aspects of life and culture, which will also be discussed further in the following chapters (Ebert’s review of *Foxes* and 9½ *Weeks* quoted in Rendleman ch. 3). In this way, Ebert’s and Rendleman’s readings of Lyne’s films further echo and support this thesis’ main argument that his films ultimately attempt to “create discussion” about various aspects of ideology and the human condition.

Ultimately, regardless of the reasons why his films have yet to be given in-depth and critical examination or how they have been labeled and analyzed in the past, it is indisputable that some of the most iconic moments in recent film history can be found in Lyne’s work. Examples range from Jennifer Beals dancing to Michael Sembello’s synthpop song “Maniac” in *Flashdance* (1983) to Kim Basinger’s striptease choreographed to Joe Cocker’s “You Can Leave Your Hat On” in 9½ *Weeks* (1986) to the climatic showdown in *Fatal Attraction* (1987) in which the camera lingers on Glenn Close’s character, whose lifeless body is shown sliding down the blood-spattered wall in the bathtub after her married ex-lover’s wife shoots her in the heart. 9 For over three decades now, Lyne’s films have been referenced and woven inter-textually into numerous films and televisions shows as well as other diverse aspects of popular culture,

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9 Lyne also directed the music video for “Maniac,” which similarly reflects the style, themes, and ideological issues present in the film (as the video is a compilation of scenes from the film). The video can be viewed in its entirety (for free) at the following web address, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GK5PyxwmFH0&list=RDGK5PyxwmFH0#t=5
including music and fashion. As evidenced by their enduring presence, it is clear that Lyne’s films have made a lasting impression on many viewers in the years since their first release and that they continue to resonate with many viewers of today, as well.

Researching the message board topics of everyday viewers amassed over the last few years is one way of observing how much of an impact Lyne’s films have made, despite his career being inactive since 2002. For example, the title of several message boards on imdb.com include “the most underrated director,” “Why are the studios not hiring this great director,” “No better Hollywood director of ADULT [sic] dramas than Lyne,” and “If he directed more movies, he would probably be as well known as Hitchcock” (found on imdb.com on the “Adrian Lyne” main page under “Message Boards”). There is also a call for more films to be directed by him. For example, there are several discussion threads (also found on imdb.com message boards) entitled “Is he making any new movies?,“ “next movie?,” and “I want more movies.” Interestingly, another message board pertaining to Lyne on imdb.com entitled “Fifty Shades of Grey” (posted in 2012, before the film was in production) includes a discussion thread in which one viewer (username Sabby77) suggests that Lyne would be a “perfect choice” to direct the 2015 film of the same name, based on the connections between Fifty Shades of Grey and the sexually charged nature of his body of work in the past. Consequently, this kind of message

10 The above-mentioned scene from Flashdance is parodied in The Sweetest Thing (2002) and referenced in The Full Monty (1997), in which the above-mentioned scene from 9½ Weeks is also referenced. Fatal Attraction is referenced in Sleepless in Seattle (1993) and an excerpt from the ending is shown in Bridget Jones’s Diary (2001). The iconic “ice cube” scene in 9½ Weeks was also reimagined and paid homage to as recently as 2015 in Fifty Shades of Grey. For a more extensive and complete list of the films and television series that have referenced Lyne’s work, refer to www.imdb.com and the “Connections” sections for each film (visit his imdb home page and go to each individual film’s page from there to find those sections, the web address for his imdb page is, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001490/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1). For further evidence of his films’ influence on various aspects of pop culture today, such as music and fashion, see the 2013 Time magazine article “What a Feeling: 10 Legacies of Flashdance”, written by Gary Susman. The article can be found at the following web address, http://entertainment.time.com/2013/04/15/what-a-feeling-10-legacies-of-flashdance/. The term “bunny-boiler” was also added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 1987 after the wide spread box office success of Fatal Attraction (the term is in reference to Glenn Close’s characters’ famous “boiling” of the Gallagher family pet “bunny” rabbit in the climactic final scene).
board is particularly important to point out in that it demonstrates how viewers have come to recognize the shared connections between Lyne’s films and more contemporary texts over the last few years. In other words, while critics and scholars have neglected to analyze or discuss Lyne’s films in the past, these message boards are further (albeit anecdotal) evidence of today’s viewers’ desire to recognize his work in more complex ways.

Lyne’s “Look”: From the Small Screen to the Big Screen

Adrian Lyne was born on March 4, 1941 in Peterborough, England and raised in London, where he attended the Highgate school. From an early age he showed an active interest in music and film. Lyne reportedly grew up playing trumpet in a jazz band named the “Colin Kellard Band” and watching French New Wave films in the early 1960s, which first inspired him to become a filmmaker (Emery). Beginning his career in the mailroom of London's J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency, Lyne soon worked his way up to become an assistant producer of commercials at two other companies (Emery). Sometimes referred to as “tea-bags” (due to their shared British heritage), Lyne emigrated to America at the same time as several other British filmmakers, including Alan Parker, Ridley Scott, Tony Scott, and Hugh Hudson, who all also had backgrounds in advertising before becoming commercially successful at the Hollywood box office beginning in the early 1980s (Hillier, p. 166).

Like his fellow “tea-bags,” Lyne’s background in commercials and advertising influenced his films’ particular visual style throughout his career. As a result of his particular focus on the look and style of his films, Lyne is also sometimes referred to as the “master of surfaces” and his films have often been described as having a “glossy” quality or “corporate sheen,” which can be attributed to his background in advertising (Müller, pp. 163-164). More specifically, there are several techniques that contribute to his work having a so-called “glossy”
quality including his recurring use of soft focus cinematography, chiaroscuro lighting, and fog or smoke machines. Therefore, his emphasis on style and the mise-en-scène is a “signature” aspect of Lyne’s to recognize when analyzing his films and when attempting to make meanings out of them. There are various other formal qualities and techniques that are present across his body of work, which are all discussed throughout this thesis as distinguishable and unique to him, as well. However, it is first critical to discuss and understand his beginnings in commercials as a key influence of his particular aesthetic that carried over into his filmmaking.

Lyne has been quoted as saying, “I’ve always hated advertising, but I treated commercials as little films. I wasn’t remotely interested in whether or not they sold the product, it was just a fabulous way for me to learn how to do it” (unreported source on imdb.com). As Lyne suggests here, making commercials often comes from the motivation to sell a product or lifestyle. However, Lyne’s invocation of glossy techniques and “dream-like” or surreal sets and atmospheres can be seen as the way in which he chooses to construct the diegetic worlds of his films in order to enhance the other elements of the text, such as the psychosexual themes they explore as well as their engagement with various ideological issues. For example, Lyne primarily directed commercials for jean companies in the 1970s, including one notable commercial for Brutus Jeans in 1974 and another for Levi’s Route 66 campaign in 1976 (Delaney). The Brutus Jeans commercial is shot in a soft focus haze that features a group of young men and women erratically romping and dancing around to the pop jingle “Jeans On.” In an apartment that is brightly lit by sunlight coming through the windows, they slowly and sensually pull up their Brutus Jeans in close-ups (the jingle was written specifically for the commercial by David Dundas). The commercial’s editing is fast-paced with jump cuts and a continual cross-cutting of the men and women in the bathroom, in an empty room with a chair in the middle to dance on,
and on the unmade bed. As such, the setting and the song playing suggest “a morning after”
scenario where the characters are hastily getting dressed after a night spent together, which is
representative of his work’s subject matter being sexual in nature from the beginning.\textsuperscript{11} These
scenes are also comparable to several seen later in his films, such as the elaborate dance scenes at
Mawby’s bar in \textit{Flashdance} and Kim Basinger’s striptease in \textit{9½ Weeks} (as shown in Figure 1).

\textbf{Figure 1:} Kim Basinger’s iconic striptease in \textit{9½ Weeks} is reminiscent of the young
women dancing in Lyne’s Brutus Jeans commercial in 1974. In this scene, her character
is shown in the shadows of the slat blinds and the light reflected from the window against
the wall, which is almost identical to the framing and positions of the women in the
commercial.

The Levi’s Route 66 commercial is similarly sexual in nature as the narrative follows two
young women traveling across the country looking to have fun and meet young men (the
commercial has a short narrative as the running time is 2 minutes and 50 seconds). The
commercial is again shot in soft focus with blurred light coming from the sunset shown in the
background of the frame, which casts faint shadows on the road, a lake, and the characters as
they make their way across the country. The editing is similarly fast-paced, with jump cuts
between rack focus shots of street signs in close-up and long shots of the road and the characters
running around and laughing as the jazz standard “(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66” plays to
reinforce the name and thematic nature of the ad campaign. The song also sets the mood and
pace of the commercial.\textsuperscript{12} Many of the opening shots with the young women are similar to the

\textsuperscript{11} The Brutus commercial can be viewed in its entirety (for free) at the following web address, \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkwJ2o0Fj3s}

\textsuperscript{12} The Levi’s commercial can be viewed in its entirety (for free) at the following web address, \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSJBH9eRIM4}
shots in *Lolita* with Professor Humbert Humbert (Jeremy Irons) and Lolita (Dominique Swain) as they aimlessly travel across the country together in their iconic 1939 Ford V8 De Luxe Station Wagon.

Interestingly, other established filmmakers began to take notice of Lyne’s work and particular visual style during his time spent directing commercials. Lyne was once quoted as saying “I remember making this advertisement up in Yorkshire when I got a message that Stanley Kubrick had called. He'd seen an ad I'd made for milk in which I'd used a particular type of graduated filter. He wanted to know exactly which filter I'd used” (Delaney). From the beginning of his career in commercials then, Lyne’s approach in using the medium to evoke a particular mood and sensual atmosphere were clearly distinguishable as innovative and unique to him. Furthermore, as the cultural studies scholar Sam Delaney noted about the “tea bag” generation of filmmakers, while some critics have characterized these directors as “crass purveyors of mindless gloss,” their techniques were “both admired and plagiarized by the industry's most credible players” and they continue to influence today’s filmmakers in terms of style and content (“Jets, jeans and Hovis”).

During his years as a commercial director, Lyne and two partners also set up their own company where he began his filmmaking career by writing and directing the two short films *The Table* (1973) and *Mr. Smith* (1976), which were both official entries in the London Film Festival (Emery). Although copies of his two short films have not been released to view or study, viewers who saw them when they were first released have posted various first-hand accounts of the films online (which are useful to consider given their apparent influence on his feature films). For example, *The Table* reportedly features a 10-minute long close-up on the hands of a wife as she is tending to chores in the kitchen while her husband confronts her about her suspected infidelity.
(according to the plot description for the film posted on imbd.com). Throughout the short film, tension builds as the wife’s hands slowly become more frantic while doing the dishes and stirring her tea as the argument progresses. This is similar to a scene in Indecent Proposal in which Diana (Demi Moore) is confronted by her husband (Woody Harrelson) about her one night sexual encounter with the enigmatic billionaire John Gage (Robert Redford), while she attempts to get back into her “normal” daily routine by washing the dishes (pictured in Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** These images are only a sample of the various intercut close-ups on Diana’s hands and face while she is tenuously washing the dishes in Indecent Proposal. The tension builds throughout this scene as she slowly begins to discuss her day with her husband David. David is primarily off-screen for the scene, but he can be overheard responding to her somewhat tentatively as the conversation progresses, which is almost identical to the framing and narrative in Lyne’s first short film The Table.

This scene culminates with a jump cut to a shot of the wine bottle that her husband throws at the fridge when she admits to “meeting” with John Gage earlier that day (pictured below in Figure 3). This is similar to the conversation between the married couple in The Table, as both characters’ faces are off-screen for the entire film and their voices are heard going back and forth on the soundtrack as their fight about the wife’s affair progresses.

**Figure 3:** A close-up of a wine bottle exploding signals the drastic climax to this scene between the struggling married couple in Indecent Proposal. The bottle explodes just before their fight escalates and moves from the kitchen to the living room. The bottle is symbolic of the end of their relationship in many ways as what is left of their marriage has effectively been “shattered” after they are unable to move on from her over-night tryst in Las Vegas.

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13 The page referenced here can be found at the following web address, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2457646/?Ref_=fn_al_tt_1
Similar to the above description of The Table as a reflection on marriage and adultery, Mr. Smith is described as an “intimate study of loneliness” focused around the titular Mr. Smith (posted on imdb.com by username Jane-Mack).\textsuperscript{14} According to another review of Mr. Smith on imdb.com entitled, “An unnerving glimpse in [sic] the suicidal mind” (written by the username Pieter Wagener) the film plays out as follows,

This short vignette starts with the morning routine of an ordinary, middle-aged British gentleman. His life appears without excitement and he is content attending to the little demands of his home and afterwards walking to his regular coffee shop for his breakfast. In the coffee shop he sits and watches others in the shop and those walking past the window, something which he and countless others have been doing during their uneventful lives. He strolls to a park where he seats himself on a bench, watching with detachment the activities of the people passing. Just when the movie-viewer [sic] is lulled into watching these boring sequences of events, he is suddenly startled by an expression of severe anxiety on Mr. Smith’s face. Amidst the contortions, Mr. Smith takes out a pistol and places it against his temple. With a last grimace, he shoots himself.\textsuperscript{15}

As this viewer describes, Lyne’s films are often focused around one or two main characters that are kept at somewhat of an objective distance throughout the narrative. They are often framed in long shots, until climactic moments at or near the end of the film in which there are slow dolly shots into close-ups of the characters, emphasizing their facial expressions and allowing a deeper insight into the characters’ emotions and mental states. For example, the scene of Mr. Smith’s suicide described by this viewer is comparable to the final shots of Lolita where there is a slow tracking shot into a close-up of Humbert Humbert (as he is shown on a hilltop overlooking school children at recess who can be heard laughing and playing in a small idyllic town in the distance). A series of extended tracking shots are intercut in this scene as Humbert reflects back on his time with Lolita through voice-over narration, before the police finally catch up to him.

\textsuperscript{14} The message board quoted here can be found at the following web address, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0461287/board/nest/81430373?ref_=_tt_bd_1

\textsuperscript{15} Pieter Wagener’s full review can be found at the following web address, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0461287/reviews?ref_=_tt_urv
after a long car chase (their sirens can be heard off-screen). Scenes of the police chasing him are also intercut throughout the film, including the opening sequence, thereby making the narrative somewhat non-linear and yet cyclical in that the chase begins and ends the film. After the long tracking shot into the close-up on Humbert’s blood-spattered face has been completed, there is a sudden jump cut to one of his earliest memories of Lolita lying on a bed. She is shown slowly laying her head down and turning toward him (lovingly returning his longing gaze), and her image becomes forever frozen in his memory (and the viewers’) in a perpetual state of childlike innocence (like the kids on the playground in the distance), before there is a final fade to black.

Humbert and Lolita’s narrative arcs are discussed further in the following chapters in combination with his film’s other leading protagonists, similar to Mr. Smith’s above.

Ultimately, as this brief discussion of Lyne’s short films shows, it is important to note that they also exhibit the “signature” traits of Lyne’s “glossy” style and psychosexual subject matter that he began to explore in his commercials and that he expanded upon in his feature films. Like his commercials and short films, each of his feature films could also be described as intimate character studies that illustrate a wide spectrum of human emotions and the human condition including jealousy, anger, joy, anxiety, despair, sex, love, and death in particular, which are also discussed further in the following chapters, as well.

In addition to recognizing Lyne’s background in advertising and short films as a key influence on his work throughout his career, another approach to describing his particular style of filmmaking is through a comparison of his work to another group of films that emerged in the 1980s in France, a film movement that is now commonly referred to as the “cinéma du look.” Examples of films considered to be part of the cinéma du look movement include Jean-Jacques Beineix’s Betty Blue (1986) and Diva (1981), Luc Beesons’s Nikita (1990) and Le Grand Bleu
(1988), and Leos Carax’s *Mauvais Sang* (1986), and *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* (1991). Like Lyne, the *cinéma du look* filmmakers drew inspiration from many of the New Hollywood films that came before them (most notably Francis Ford Coppola’s *One From the Heart* in 1981 and *Rumble Fish* in 1983). Similar to the many other cultural influences present in Lyne’s films, the *cinéma du look* filmmakers also reportedly drew heavily on late Rainer Werner Fassbinder films such as *Lola* (1981), television commercials, music videos, and fashion photography (indiewire.com).

Rather than being considered a movement that is characterized by a collective ideology or thematic focus, the *cinéma du look* filmmakers were often grouped together and written about for their “technical mastery of the medium, a cinephile tendency to cite from other films, and a spectacular visual style” (Austin, p. 119). In his 1989 article entitled “The neo-baroque directors: Beineix, Besson, Carax from *Diva* (1981) to *Le Grand Bleu* (1988),” Raphaël Bassan was the first to analyze the *cinéma du look* films as more than texts that simply favor “spectacle over narrative” and “style over substance” (Austin, pp. 119-120). Consequently, Bassan’s work is similar to the objectives of this thesis as an in-depth study of Lyne’s films, as I also aim to show how they use “style as substance” in various ways and to argue how they are more polysemic than previous scholars and critics have suggested (such as Faludi and Wyatt). Bassan’s arguments about the *cinéma du look* filmmakers also echo Ebert’s observations about the active role that style and the mise-en-scène plays in films that many consider to be empty or devoid of deeper meanings.

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16 The marketing for Lyne’s films as well as the *cinéma du look* films was also primarily focused on the style and “look” of the films rather than the narrative or themes explored within them. For example, Lyne’s films were often marketed as high-profile star vehicles and the *cinéma du look* films often included tag lines or review excerpts that solely communicated an interest pertaining to the films’ formal qualities, such as the following review for *Diva*, “incredibly stylish and visually ravishing” (quoted from *Empire* magazine’s review of the film on one of the promotional posters), which are strategies that are both reductive and vague.
Also like Lyne, the *cinéma du look* filmmakers were successful at the box office but often
given divided critical reception. For example, many critics labeled them as “superficial” and
“completely absent of political or social concerns” (Austin, p. 119). However, as a counter to
their many critics, the film scholars Guy Austin and Will Higbee also expanded on Bassan’s
original observations in an effort to provide more complex analyses of the movement’s tenets
that Bassan was the first to acknowledge that these films exhibit several recurring themes that are
accentuated by their emphasis on style and spectacle, including doomed love affairs, a cynical
attitude toward the police and authority, as well as alienated young protagonists in urban areas
(pp. 119-120). Those same themes and narrative patterns can be observed in Lyne’s films; as in
their ability to express a questioning of the current political and cultural milieu of American
society (as the *cinéma du look* films provided a critical look at French society’s ideological
institutions and constructs, such as class divisions and hierarchies in particular).

Bassan also suggests that one of the more innovative key features of the movement was
the postmodern conflation and referencing of high art with low art forms (which the *Cahiers du
cinéma* critics of the time considered to be “inferior cultural forms”) such as television, music
videos, advertising, and comic strips (Austin, p. 120). Expanding on Bassan’s observations, Will
Higbee quotes the film theorist Jill Forbes to suggest that the *cinéma du look* films can also be
seen as having a “subversive edge” in the ways that they recycle existing texts and juxtapose
high and low art cultural references (p. 157). For example, *Subway* (directed by Beeson, 1985)
references the comic book hero Batman throughout the narrative and *Diva* (directed by Beineix)
is centered on a working-class non-white female protagonist (Wilhelmina Fernandez) who
aspires to be an opera singer. This conflation of high and low art (or classical vs. pop culture) is
also commonly seen in Lyne’s films. For example, *Flashdance* is similar to *Diva* in that the working-class female protagonist (Jennifer Beals) aspires to become a professional ballet dancer, but she infuses her own unique modern dancing style, which is featured in her final audition for the dance academy at the end of the film. This conflation of ballet, which is considered to be a “high art” and classical dance style, with jazz and breakdancing, which are more “lower art” based dance influences, could be interpreted as a way of questioning the “moral imperative of the democratization of art” and “the role that technology has to play in it,” as *Diva*’s narrative attempts to do (quoted from Will Higbee’s analysis of *Diva* in the 2006 book *The Cinema of France*, p. 157). As Higbee also remarks in quoting cultural theorist Frederic Jameson, the cinéma du look filmmakers displayed characteristic elements of postmodernism in their work as a way of creating “moral and political dimensions” within their films, which is one way of describing Lyne’s focus on style, as well. Ultimately then, similar to the cinéma du look filmmakers, Lyne’s postmodern juxtaposition of high and low cultural forms can also be interpreted as “a formal challenge to and democratization of the conventions in mainstream films” (Higbee, p. 157).

The cinéma du look filmmakers were not the only one’s challenging conventions and pushing the boundaries within the confines of mainstream cinema. For example, the evolution of classical Hollywood narrative structure along with the hybridization of standardized generic formulas is common in the work of many of the post-structuralist and “postmodern auteurs” that emerged to America around the same time as Lyne such as David Cronenberg (i.e. *Videodrome* in 1983), Brian De Palma (i.e. *Body Double* in 1984), and David Lynch (i.e. *Blue Velvet* in 1986) (Constable, p. 52). Like Lyne, these so-called “postmodern auteurs” began their careers in the...
years immediately following the New Hollywood generation of filmmakers (the late 1970s and early 1980s) and made films that are focused on style as well as dark and psychosexual themes and subject matter. Interestingly, Lyne is (once again) the least written about director of this group of filmmakers, which further demonstrates why an in-depth study of his films is curiously absent from critical-cultural discourse surrounding influential filmmakers in America in the late twentieth-century (and adds to the motivation behind this study to spark a renewed interest in Lyne’s work within the scholarly community).

In summation, the discussion of Lyne’s background in advertising and short films as well the comparison of his films to the cinéma-du-look movement throughout this section is meant to serve as further evidence that his particular style and approach to filmmaking continued to evolve and form distinct patterns and “signature” traits that can be analyzed at length in order to decode various meanings within them. Furthermore, given his background in advertising and its significant influence on his “glossy” visual style, the marketing of Lyne’s films is also interesting and somewhat necessary to consider when conducting a comprehensive study of his work. However, rather than suggesting that the meanings contained within his films can be reduced to a single extra-textual image, the following section briefly analyzes how the various connections between Lyne’s films are hinted at and communicated to viewers through several of their marketing images.

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being formally challenging in various ways (Constable quoted in Connor, p. 52). Constable also lists several of the French New Wave and New Hollywood directors alongside De Palma and Lynch (among others American directors who emerged in the 1990s such as Quentin Tarantino) as directors who all created films that display characteristic elements of the postmodern aesthetic, which is still the predominate mode of Hollywood texts today. See The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism (2004, edited by Steven Connor) and Postmodern Auteurs: Coppola, Lucas, De Palma, Spielberg, and Scorsese (1991, Kenneth Von Gunderson) for further reading on these specific Hollywood filmmakers’ (among others) interpretation of postmodern techniques and ideals in the late twentieth century and how their films continue to influence American film culture today.
Chapter Breakdown: The “Big Picture(s)”

An analysis of the variety of promotional posters and cover art images for Lyne’s feature films (featured on VHS, DVD, and Blu-ray releases) further suggests the kinds of readings that are explored throughout this thesis in terms of how they consistently attempt to question various ideological norms and constructs. Providing visual examples of the marketing of Lyne’s films also adds another layer to my in-depth study of his work.

The more open and subversive readings that I argue are present within Lyne’s films can be seen when looking at the marketing images for each one individually as well as when they are compared to one another, which further highlights and solidifies the connections between them. For example, when comparing the cover art for Foxes, Flashdance, and Lolita, they all similarly feature each films’ teenage female protagonists placed in the center of the frame and looking at the camera head-on, which alludes to them being confident, independent, and the central figures of the films (exhibited in Figure 4).

![Figure 4: The cover art images Foxes, Flashdance, and Lolita give the consumer/viewer a preview of the teenage female characters’ active agency and suggests their prominent roles in each of their respective narratives.](image)

In addition to establishing the role that the female characters play in each of these films, the same kinds of intimate urban settings can also be seen in the background of each of their cover art images. Taking this a step further, the city as a place of excitement and strength for the young
women is also alluded to in the cover art for all three films in these images as the mix of warm colors reflect the romanticized and sensual tone of each film (a mix of yellows, oranges, and reds accentuate the city as having a warm and nurturing tone for the female characters in *Foxes* and *Lolita*, while blues and muted colors project a safe and calm environment in the cover art for *Flashdance*). Similar to the numerous connections that can be observed in their cover art images, Chapter 2 primarily draws on theories surrounding melodrama as a predominantly “female form,” to argue that these three films each attempt to foreground the female characters’ subjectivity and agency as well as demonstrate how Lyne’s films can be considered “women’s films” in many ways.

In contrast to the women, the men on the promotional posters/DVD cover art for Lyne’s films are set in the background or lower parts of the frame and suggests that they are the secondary or more inferior characters (such as Jeremy Irons in the *Lolita* poster in Figure 4). For example, the cover art for *Jacob’s Ladder* is somewhat different than that of Lyne’s other films (and several variations exist), but one of the most widely circulated posters features Tim Robbins (who plays the titular character Jacob Singer) as a blurred and somewhat androgynous or genderless figure in the center of the frame (Figure 5).

*Figure 5:* Disturbing and somewhat indecipherable images appear on cover art for *Jacob’s Ladder*. Furthermore, the “dark” (noirish) and convoluted nature of the narrative is mirrored by these shadowy images. This specific cover art poster for the film also explicitly suggests the somewhat complicated and “blurred” relationship that Jacob has with the viewer, his surroundings, and several other characters in the film.

Although it is difficult to see, in this particular cover art image, the main character appears to be throwing his head back and screaming in pain, which is similar to the characterization of other
male protagonists in Lyne’s films as the weaker and more passive characters, that are ruled by feelings of anxiety and paranoia. Similar to Jacob in Jacob’s Ladder, “damaged” male characters are present across Lyne’s oeuvre and serve as the basis of my analysis in Chapter 3, which also draws on various theoretical works surrounding film noir and neo-noir, to discuss the specific ways his films attempt to raise questions about gender roles and expectations as well as patriarchy and the urban capitalist system. Interestingly, Lyne’s films have been briefly written about in relation to their exhibition of noirish elements by several scholars in the past, such as Linda Ruth Williams in The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema (2005) and Candida Yeats in Masculine Jealousy and Contemporary Cinema (2007), who argue that his work often exhibits a hybridization of film noir with elements common in the horror genre, comedy, melodrama and erotic thrillers, among several others, which is addressed in more detail in Chapter 4. However, scholarly works have yet to conduct a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of Lyne’s films in relation to their particularly “noirish” inflections, which is the focus of Chapter 3. Along with those discussed above, some of the most widely circulated promotional posters and cover art images for each of Lyne’s other films also feature the female characters posed as the dominant and more active figures with the male characters positioned as the secondary and more submissive ones. The female characters are often either literally positioned above the men (9½ Weeks, Indecent Proposal, and Lolita), turning away from them in defiance (Fatal Attraction, Indecent Proposal, and Unfaithful), or as completely enraptured in sexual bliss while the men are posed underneath them/wrapped in their embrace (9½ Weeks, Fatal Attraction, Indecent Proposal and Unfaithful, which are exhibited in Figure 6).
Figure 6: The blatantly sexual ways that the actors are posed on the cover art for these four films directly reflects each narrative’s focus on a variety of erotic relationships. The contrasted posing of the men and women, some with literal splits or rips in between them (on the Fatal Attraction and Indecent Proposal cover art), also signifies the “tears” in the relationships of the characters, which are a result of the adulterous (and often tragic) love affairs explored in each of the films.

In addition to signifying the power dynamics between the characters, the hyper-sexual nature of Lyne’s films is also reflected in these cover art images, which is further accentuated by a mixture of various bold and vibrant colors (i.e. shades of red, range, black, and white) used in the lettering/font and backgrounds. Consequently, these images are singled out and compared to one another as it is Lyne’s films’ recurring focus on various forms of “transgressive” sex and sexuality that is the foundation of Chapter 4’s analysis.

Overall, the marketing images for Lyne’s films are useful to consider in that they suggest the psychosexual nature of his work as well as various other characteristic aspects that I examine in the following chapters in relation to how they challenge conventional gender roles and explore issues around sex/sexuality in particular. The cover art for Lyne’s films also “often contradict and supersede the written tag lines” and labels featured alongside the images, which tend to focus more on the titillation or stylistic aspects of his films, rather than the content, thereby alluding to their subversive undertones (Williams, p. 391). By simply examining a sample of the marketing images for Lyne’s films, it can also be argued that the connections between them are so strongly engrained that mere (one-dimensional) static images are capable of suggesting the “signature” elements that are displayed across his oeuvre and his “auteur brand,” which this thesis is focused
The three “signatures” explored within the following body chapters can broadly be summarized as follows: (1) the articulation of female struggle, desire, and agency, (2) hegemonic negotiation of masculinity and the critique of urban capitalism, and (3) challenging heteronormativity through “transgressive” sex and sexuality. In addition to auteur theory, the following chapters use a selection of theories and discourses surrounding melodrama, film noir, and transgressive sexuality to aid in fleshing out these “signatures” and to showcase how Lyne’s films attempt to “create discussion” in a wide variety of ways.

This study concludes with Chapter 5, a summary, which bounds together and solidifies the connections and relationships made between Lyne’s films that are formulated throughout this study. This final chapter also briefly reiterates how Lyne can be thought of as an auteur and how the readings of his films discussed throughout this study are produced when looked at specifically through the auteur theory framework. I also reemphasize that the theories applied to analyze his work throughout this study are conducive to making meanings out of them that have not been considered in the past.
CHAPTER 2

“YOU LOOK LIKE KIDS, BUT YOU DON’T ACT LIKE THEM!”: THE ARTICULATION
OF FEMALE STRUGGLE, DESIRE, AND AGENCY

**Figure 7:** While attending her high school child development class, Jeanie (Jodie Foster) appears disinterested and distracted as she holds her “baby” upside down in an early scene of *Foxes*, Lyne’s first feature film as a director. The irony of her “bad parenting” is highlighted by the various unhealthy parent-child relationships that serve as the principal focus of the film.

After her best friend Annie (Cherie Curie) is committed to a mental hospital by her father Frank (a policeman – played by Wayne Storm), the teenage Jeanie and her single mother Mary (Sally Kellerman) have a dramatic and climactic fight in the living room of their cramped bourgeois apartment in *Foxes*. This fight is the first time in the film that the characters confront the underlying tension that has slowly built up around their strained mother-daughter relationship over the course of the narrative. The two of them begin fighting and crying about Jeanie’s friends’ latest antics and her mother’s similarly irresponsible and promiscuous behavior, when her mother finally screams out, “Aren’t there any nice people left in the world?,“ she goes on to question her daughter’s sanity, and her own, in saying, “Maybe you’re all sick… I don’t even know who you are anymore. You look like kids, but you don’t act like them! You’re short forty year-olds and you’re tough ones.” In this scene, Mary’s emotional outbursts at Jeanie articulate and encapsulate the central conflict of the film, which can be described as the frustration that the characters feel in struggling to connect with themselves, each other, and the world around them (as demonstrated in **Figure 7**).
The feeling of being disconnected, or what can more accurately be described as a feeling of “alienation,” is also a thematic concern at the core of texts written about and described as “family melodramas.” For example, in his seminal article “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on The Family Melodrama” (1972), film theorist Thomas Elsaesser describes alienation as “a basic condition of the human experience” and what he identifies as a common thematic thread in the classical Hollywood family melodramas of the late 1940s to the early 1960s (p. 186). Examples of the classical Hollywood films discussed by Elsaesser include those directed by Douglas Sirk, Nicholas Ray, and Vincente Minnelli. As a result of these films’ focus on the alienation and emotional distress of the characters, which primarily emanates from within the family and in the struggle to find their identity, Elsaesser argues that the family melodrama is a distinct sub-genre that exposes the tensions and contradictions that lie beneath the surface of post-war sub(urban) America (p. 167). As noted in relation to Foxes above, Elsaesser’s description of melodrama’s ideological function in cinematic texts is applicable to Lyne’s films, and serves as the basis for this chapter’s discussion of his films as employing narrative strategies and formal techniques common in the melodramatic mode to raise questions about norms around class, gender, and sexuality.

This chapter’s analysis primarily draws on an understanding of melodrama that was also first posited by Elsaesser, which he describes as “a specific mode of cinematic expression” that is “neither inherently conservative nor progressive” in that melodramatic texts “cannot completely lay to bare the cultural conflicts that energize them” (p. 165). In his expansion of Elsaesser’s article, Bill Nichols refers to melodrama as “an ambivalent form capable of various political inflections” and as a form that is “internally polyvalent, capable of tension producing counterpoint between form and content.” Elsaesser’s claim that melodramas often exhibit “a
subversive charge -- despite being radically ambiguous” is also applicable to the description of Lyne’s films as open to multiple readings and is analogous to this thesis’ overarching argument that Lyne’s films attempt to “create discussion” about various ideological constructs without necessarily being read as capable of completely overturning them (p. 169).

As Elsaesser also points out in his article, “bearing in mind that everybody has some idea of what is meant by melodramatic,” it is important to establish precisely what I mean by the term “melodrama” (p. 165). In addition to describing melodrama as a somewhat contradictory and subversive mode of cinematic expression, Elsaesser defines melodrama as a “system of punctuation” and “an expressive code,” “a particular form of dramatic mise-en-scène in films that can be consciously adopted by filmmakers in the production of their work” (pp. 172-173). Similarly, film scholar Jackie Byars describes melodrama as a genre that has developed from the study of directors, such as those discussed in Elsaesser’s seminal work, who are “obsessed with the stylistic manipulation” (p. 10). Byars also states that the focus on “stylistic manipulation” within melodrama has been “valorized by film critics as the ‘excess’ that calls attention to the sociopolitical contradictions inherent to bourgeois stories” (p. 10). The “excess” described by Byars is similarly displayed in Lyne’s films, as each text’s focus on style can be read as a way of questioning the sociopolitical contradictions around class, gender, and sexuality inherent in the historical and cultural context in which they were first produced and released. Ultimately, the use of a particular “melo-dramatic mise-en-scène” and stylistic “excess” is integral to understanding Lyne’s films as focusing on style and form-as-content to make meaning, similar to the cinéma-du-look filmmakers discussed in the previous chapter. Rather than arguing that Lyne’s films “consciously” or “subconsciously” incorporate melodramatic elements however, this chapter uses various discourses surrounding melodrama in the cinema in combination with textual
analysis to open up his films to readings that have previously been ignored or underdeveloped in relation to their stylistic, thematic, and ideological implications.

Trials and Tribulations: The “Troubled” Evolution of Melodrama

The word “melodrama” first appeared in the eighteenth century when the French philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau combined the words “melos” and “drama” to describe a dramatic stage monologue (Anker, introduction). When deconstructing the word, melodrama literally means, “a drama accompanied by music” (Elsaesser, p. 174). This is a definition that can be broadly applied to numerous texts in various historical and cultural contexts. Therefore, it is also important to acknowledge that melodrama has its roots in several different literary and media forms that have evolved over time and vary from country to country, which are critical to recognize before discussing the more contemporary and unique manifestation of melodrama in Lyne’s films.

To demonstrate how the melodrama was first formed in various historical and cultural contexts simultaneously, Elsaesser discusses the various traditional forms of melodrama as it appeared in several different countries. He cites the (female) gothic novels popularized in Victorian England, France’s costume dramas and historical novels, Germany’s Bänkellied’s (music hall dramas) and Moritats (street songs), and Italian opera from the eighteenth and nineteenth century as early texts that exhibit melodramatic motifs (p. 166). As Elsaesser’s broad and international array of early examples of melodrama demonstrates, melodramatic elements have been utilized in various “low” and “high” cultural forms for the last few centuries, and these forms served as the models that have been adapted and borrowed from by screenwriters and directors in cinematic melodramas, such as the cinéma-du-look filmmakers discussed in the
previous chapter (p. 167). Additionally, Elsaesser notes that melodramatic texts often emerge in times of major socio-political and cultural changes, such as industrialization, urbanization, and nascent entrepreneurial capitalism, in order to express tensions and repressed feelings about such changes (p. 170). This is applicable to this chapter’s discussion of Lyne’s films as melodramatic texts given the turbulent historical and cultural context in which his films were set and released (the 1980s through the early 2000s – as discussed in Chapter 1).

According to Elsaesser, the continual evolution and persistence of melodrama can be attributed to its plasticity as a mode of storytelling and its mass appeal through the use of popular idioms (pp. 171-172). The form’s “plasticity” is also reflected in Byars’ observations about the evolution of melodrama. Byars states that,

Melodramas often function at the level of the individual and the personal, drawing its material form from the everyday. The insistence on the part of the ordinary at least partially accounts for the melodrama’s popularity and flexibility – first in its theatrical forms and later in its various novelistic, filmic and televisual forms. (p. 13)

Echoing Byars, Nichols argues that films that have adopted the melodramatic mode are about the “constraint” of the everyday, which is evidenced by their “focus on individuals and domestic spaces; on small actions and events; and on coding’s of dress, demeanor, and action” (p. 165). Similar to this description of melodrama as focusing on the everyday and “constriction,” the focus on the “alienation” of individuals who are struggling to cope with the trials and tribulations of everyday life is present across Lyne’s body of work and serves as the “signature” thread that is the focus of this chapter. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, Lyne’s films can also be described as “intimate character studies” that revolve around the protagonists’ attempts to navigate their daily lives despite the constant pressures, intense emotions (i.e. jealousy, anger, joy, anxiety, ecstasy, despair, sex, love, and death), and continual changes in each of their personal environments.
It is also important to note that up until recently filmic texts labeled as melodramas had gone largely dismissed and ignored by scholars and critics due to their “low art stigma” (Anker, introduction). This stigma can be partly attributed to the form’s association with women, but also due to the debate over whether or not to consider melodrama a “genre” per se. These issues within the history and evolution of melodramatic criticism are recounted in Jackie Byars’ book *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodramas* (1991), in which she suggests that melodrama only began to gain respect in academic studies in the late 1960s with the simultaneous rise of the second-wave of feminism and post-structuralist theories in film and cultural criticism (p. 15). Byars states that,

In the 1960s, scholars of theater and literature became increasingly interested in performance and theatricality, and this led them toward considerations of melodrama. Film criticism, not yet secure in academe, was at the time dominated by auteurist criticism, by mise-en-scène criticism, and by genre criticism, but two obstacles blocked a foray into melodrama by genre critics. First and foremost— the genres most often associated with “melodrama” -- referred to as “women film’s” or “weepies” -- lacked cultural valorization because of their association with female audiences and genre critics kept defensively to the “classic” (or “masculine”) genres such as the western or the gangster film. Second and conceptually more difficult (though this was not recognized at the time), considering melodrama a genre opens a Pandora’s box of difficult theoretical problems. (p. 16)

Given the complicated history of melodrama in both art and film criticism as recounted by Elsaesser and Byars, considering Lyne’s films as melodramas therefore also partly explains why he has yet to be written about as an auteur or a filmmaker “worthy of study.” As Byars suggests, the “theoretical problems” that come with considering melodrama a genre continue to present themselves within scholarly discussions of melodrama today. Furthermore, as Byars notes, there has been much debate about melodrama’s association with female audiences and the way that women are portrayed in them.

As the study of melodrama as a genre has continued to evolve since the 1960s and 1970s,
a “feminist” (or “post-feminist”) reading also emerged in the work of various cultural theorists. As Byars points out, “women’s films” and “weepies” are just two of the many labels that have been associated with melodramas over the evolution of the form in their marketing and in scholarly criticism. According to Mary Anne Doane, these terms developed due to melodrama’s recurrent focus on female subjects and “women’s concerns” (i.e. problems around domestic life and the family, motherhood, marriage, self-sacrifice and romance), the female authorship of many of the texts’ screenplays or source materials (i.e. novels or memoirs), and because the target audience is primarily women (Doane, pp. 152-153). As Doane suggests, due to the form’s focus on women throughout its history (combined with the emergence of various post-structuralist works in the 1970s through to today) melodrama has come to be regarded as primarily focused on “women’s concerns” and “female spaces,” which allows for the foregrounding and articulation of female struggle, desire, subjectivity, and agency.

Drawing on the understanding of melodrama as a predominantly female form then, this chapter argues that Lyne’s films can be seen as foregrounding the “female subjects” and their “everyday concerns.” In Lyne’s films there is a recurring focus on the struggle of the female characters to cope with the pressures of daily life and a constant feeling of disconnection and

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18 Other terms now commonly used to describe the “woman's film” in scholarly criticism include "drama," "romance," "love story," "comedy drama," "soap opera," and “chick flicks” (Altman, p. 32). In addition to these, various other labels have developed since the term “woman's film” first appeared in film studies and popular culture. For example, Netflix organizes films that can be considered women’s films or melodramas more broadly under the category of “romantic dramas”. Consequently, it is interesting to note that the labels associated with melodrama in scholarly criticism have been and continue to be as broad and wide ranging as the form’s history.

19 Mary Anne Doane has also argued that the “woman's film” is not a "pure genre" because it is crossed and informed by a number of other genres in addition to melodrama, such as film noir, horror, and comedy (Doane quoted in Altman, pp. 28-29). Similarly to Doane, film scholar Scott Simmon argues that “the woman's film has remained elusive to the point of having its very existence questioned” (p. 68). This “elusiveness”, he argues, is partially due to the fact that the woman's film is an “oppositional genre” which can only be defined in opposition to male-centered genres like the western and gangster film (p. 68). This description is similar to Byars description of the “woman’s film” as a “female-centered” genre cited above, which led to its “low art” stigma and dismissal with in critical studies up until the 1960s (p. 16).
alienation. All of the leading female protagonists in Lyne’s films desire and seek out autonomy and fulfillment despite the closed, unstable, and unsympathetic worlds that they inhabit. In other words, rather than accepting their alienation, all of the leading female characters in Lyne’s films attempt to negotiate with their positions. The construction of a female dominated textual space with active and strong female characters at the forefront of the narrative is contrary to how Lyne’s films have been read by critics in the past (such as Faludi). Lyne’s focus on the female protagonists as active and desiring subjects also provides another link to melodrama as an “ambivalent” and “polyvalent” mode or genre.

Another way of phrasing Lyne’s first “signature” thread is the articulation of female struggle, desire, and agency through his own unique “brand” of family melodrama, which is the focus of this chapter’s ensuing textual analysis. The three films of Lyne’s that most predominantly display this “signature” are *Foxes*, *Flashdance*, and *Lolita*. These three films are all closely related in more cogent and direct ways than Lyne’s others in that they are all what could be described as “coming-of-age” films (or “teen pictures”) that feature narratives specifically centered on adolescent female protagonists that are dealing with issues of teenage angst (i.e. the desire to rebel and budding sexuality) and the “pains of growing up” in middle-class and working class America (i.e. the 1980s in *Foxes* and *Flashdance*, and the late 1940s and early 1950s in *Lolita*). Furthermore, similar to the discussion of their DVD cover art posters in the previous chapter, the connections between these three films are further solidified by the pervasive and iconic images of the strong and confident young women featured in each film, which also permeate the diegetic worlds of the films themselves.

Growing Pains: Lyne’s “Brand” of Family Melodrama in *Foxes*, *Flashdance*, and *Lolita*
The importance of the relationship between music and drama in Lyne’s films cannot be overstated. His films can be described literally as “melo-dramas” in that music is one of the primary driving forces of the narrative (similar to the structural and thematic use of music in his commercials as well as the cinéma-du-look films, as discussed in the previous chapter). The teenage female protagonists of Foxes, Flashdance, and Lolita express their identity through music (among other forms of popular culture) and it is their primary means of coping with their feelings of constriction and alienation when facing their problems. The music in these films is present in both the diegetic and non-diegetic soundtracks and it often comments on the protagonists’ struggles as well as directly reflects their state of mind. Lyne’s use of music in these three particular films also specifically relates to Elsaesser’s description of family melodramas as texts that commonly “put melos into drama” to function as both a diegetic and non-diegetic element of the narrative (p. 174).

Foxes follows the “everyday struggles” of the four adolescent female protagonists Jeanie, Annie, Madge (Marilyn Kagan), and Deirdre (Kandice Stroh). In the opening sequence, the viewer is introduced to the four girls and taken into the center of their world. In this scene, their closeness is made apparent “visually” through a series of fluid tracking shots and dissolves in Jeanie’s bedroom one morning before school, which reflects Elsaesser’s description of directors of melodrama as employing a “conscious use of form-as-content” (pp. 172-173). The girls all find a way to sleep on the bed and the floor despite how small and cramped the room is, which alludes to how comfortable they are with one another. This sequence is primarily meant to establish the room as a distinctly “female space” where the girls feel safe and free to express themselves whenever they are together. For example, the panning shots glide across the untidy room with close-ups on various “stereotypical” teenage girl items including pink hair curlers, fast
food wrappers, a rolled up tube of acne medication, nail polish, and a picture of the 1970s “teen hearthrob” John Travolta hanging on the wall. The opening scene of Foxes is therefore important to single out in that it also establishes the close relationship between the four teens, which they attempt to maintain throughout the rest of the narrative. Furthermore, this scene introduces the concept that the teens each represent a different side of the same coin, so to speak.

The construction of the close relationship between the four girls also relates to Elsaesser’s observation that family melodramas often feature four to six characters that are “all tied up in a single configuration” and “yet each is given an even thematic emphasis and independent point of view” (p. 185).²⁰ Although each of the four female protagonists is given a unique point of view in Foxes, it is Jeanie who emerges as the moral center of the group, serving as the viewer’s guide over the course of the narrative. Similar to this “pull” towards Jeanie, Elsaesser points out that in family melodramas there is no central heroine per se, but a “gravitational pull towards one protagonist” often appears for the viewer (p. 185). According to Elsaesser, with no central heroine, the viewer is left to identify and sympathize with all of the film’s characters as they struggle to cope with the pressures of their daily lives. This also relates to Elsaesser’s assertion that family melodramas can be read as “objective renderings of subjective experiences” (p. 185). These observations about family melodrama can be aptly applied to describe Foxes, as the film closely follows the four girls as they attempt to cope with adolescent angst (i.e. school, sex, peer pressure) and their parents’ (and society’s) expectations for their futures. However, it is important to emphasize that the film in no way reductively suggests that the girls’ experiences are one in the same. Instead, the film portrays each girl’s

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²⁰ Elsaesser cites the following films as examples of the relationship dynamics between characters similar to the one’s that I am arguing are present in Foxes: Minnelli’s Home from the Hill (1960) and The Cobweb (1955) along with Sirk’s The Tarnished Angels (1957) and Written on the Wind (1956). See his article “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on The Family Melodrama” for further examples and detailed analysis (p. 183).
story as vastly different and yet they can be argued to be emanating from a “single-consciousness,” similar to Elsaesser’s description of the relationship between the characters of classical Hollywood family melodramas. Furthermore, Ebert’s review of the film states that because “the focus is split between the four girls, the narrative can be understood as somewhat “episodic” in that mimics the “shapeless structure of the girls days and nights” (Ebert quoted in Rendleman, ch. 3).

Despite the fact that the films discussed in Elsaesser’s article were set and released nearly 30 years before Lyne’s films, there are numerous other identifiable links between his films and classical Hollywood family melodramas. For example, there are various interesting and notable links between *Foxes* and director Nicholas Ray’s 1955 film *Rebel Without A Cause* that further demonstrates how melodrama underpins the narrative of Lyne’s first film. Although *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955) is set in the context of Post-World War II in an “idyllic” suburb of Los Angeles, *Foxes* deals with similar issues around the family and identity, while updating them to the social and cultural context of the late 1970s/early 1980s in a much “grittier” suburb of San Fernando Valley (just outside of Los Angeles). For example, the central conflict of the film for the four teens in *Foxes* is not with each other, but in relating to their parents and the world around them. This is analogous to the central anxiety around the family and the desire of the teenage protagonists Jim (James Dean), Judy (Natalie Wood), and Plato (Sal Mineo) to escape their repressive home environments in *Rebel Without A Cause*, as described by Elsaesser in his article (p. 178). Both the trio of friends in *Rebel Without of Cause* and the four teenage girls in *Foxes* function as their own form of a “family unit” as they attempt to find an escape from their dysfunctional home lives.
Similar to the teenage protagonists described by Elsaesser in *Rebel Without A Cause* (and various other classical Hollywood family melodramas), the teenage girls in *Foxes* also constantly express the feeling that their parents, teachers, and all of the other adults in their lives “do not understand them.” For example, echoing Jim’s iconic confession to his parents in the opening scene of *Rebel Without A Cause*, when he cries out, “You’re tearing me apart!,” the teens in *Foxes* often express their frustrations with their parents only once they are pushed to their breaking points (pictured in **Figure 8**).

**Figure 8**: Jim in *Rebel Without of Cause* (on the left) and Madge with her mother (Lois Smith) in *Foxes* (on the right). Both Jim and Madge are at their “breaking points.” They both beg and plead with their parents to listen to them but the ruptures in their relationships remain. Both films emphasize these kinds of “emotional outbursts” and climactic moments built up around “family (melo)drama” throughout the narrative.

Instances of this include the following outbursts from Madge and Jeanie when fighting with their parents; “You don’t think that we can have any serious emotion? That any of us can experience something really deep?,” “you keep wanting me to cry, I don’t want to cry anymore!,” and “Nobody wants to feel the pain in things anymore. For instance, I feel the pain in things sometimes.” This literal focus on the characters’ emotional distress directly relates to Elsaesser’s observations about the formal technique of “dramatic discontinuity” in family melodramas, which he describes as “letting-the-emotions-rise and then bringing them down suddenly with a thump” (p. 183). Elsaesser argues that this technique produces “strong emotional effects” and puts the viewer “in the position of seeing and evaluating contrasting attitudes” through a “blow-by-blow of the emotional drama experienced by the characters” as it constantly erupts into the
mise-en-scène, and consequently, into the thematic and ideological structures of the narrative (p. 183). Similar to Rebel Without A Cause, Foxes can therefore be described as a “blow-by-blow of the emotional drama” of the girls’ daily lives, which drives the action of the narrative.

As Elsaesser also points out in his article in relation to classical Hollywood family melodramas, the music in Foxes reflects the “rise-and-fall rhythm of the narrative” and “plays both a structural and thematic role” in the film, which relates back to my overarching description of Lyne’s films as literal “melo-dramas” (p. 174). In his review of the film, Ebert describes the film as exhibiting “the sounds and rhythms of real teen-age lives,” which “echoes” Elsaesser’s labeling of classical Hollywood family melodramas as “tales of sound and fury.” With original music composed and conducted by Italian composer and “Father of Disco” Giorgio Moroder, the importance of music is established from the first scene of the film with the theme song “On The Radio” (imdb.com).21 Donna Summer’s slow and whimsical 1979 disco anthem plays on the soundtrack during the opening scene and sets the tone for the rest of the film. Juxtaposed with the song, sirens can also be heard wailing outside, which foreshadows the impending dangers that the girls will face over the course of the narrative. Several different versions and verses of “On The Radio” also serve as a leitmotif for the girls throughout the film. The song plays whenever the girls are all together and is symbolic of the strength that they find in their friendship.

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21 Moroder is also credited with pioneering synth pop/disco and electronic music (Poe). He began his career in the 1970s producing various hits with Donna Summer, including “On The Radio”, when he also founded Musicland Studios in Munich (Poe). He won one of his three Academy Awards for Best Song for “Flashdance...What a Feeling” and he has continued to have success in the music industry, including his recent collaboration with the French synthpop duo Daft Punk on their album “Random Access Memories” in 2014, which won Best Album of the Year, earning Moroder the fourth Grammy of his career. The album’s third track is a song entitled “Giorgio by Moroder,” which features a monologue by Moroder about his early life and career. He is therefore a very prolific composer who came to prominence at the same time that Lyne came to Hollywood, and their collaboration on his first two films was a significant point in each of their careers that put both of them on the map, so to speak, as new and influential voices in mainstream film production and popular culture.
In addition to the prominence of the girls theme “On The Radio,” the “thematic and structural role of music” is highlighted in various other ways in the film. For example, the title of the film comes from the song “20th Century Foxes” by the rock band Angel, who are featured performing the song live at a concert the girls go to midway through the film. In addition to underscoring the action, music is a form of solace for the girls throughout the film. In one of the first scenes of the film in Jeanie’s apartment, Annie tells Jeanie that whenever she needs to “mellow out” she always listens to her mother’s copy of The Beatles’ “Abbey Road.” In a parallel scene near the middle of the film, Jeanie takes Annie’s advice as she uses music to “mellow out” after a fight with her mother and she decides to play the classic rock hit “More Than A Feeling” by Boston. As she sits and listens to the song (on the floor in the living room of her apartment), the following lyrics can be clearly heard and read as directly reflecting the loneliness she feels coupled with her desire to escape through music,

I looked out this morning and the sun was gone
Turned on some music to start my day
I lost myself in a familiar song
I close my eyes and I drift away

The role of music is therefore highlighted in nearly every scene of the film, and is integrated into the girls’ daily lives as much as the sounds of the city, which also have their own rhythm that contributes to the pace and tone of the narrative.

In addition to the music, the hilly streets of the San Fernando Valleys also reflect the “rise-and-fall” structure of the narrative (similar to the various hilly locales that serve as the backdrop for Rebel Without A Cause), as the four protagonists find a mixture of excitement and danger on their trips into the city. As Madge states in one scene, the girls’ only goal over the course of the narrative is to “get out alive.” Similar, again, to the teenage protagonists described by Elsaesser in Rebel Without A Cause, the teenage girls are all united by their shared motivation
to find “someplace of their own” where they can be in total control of their lives and act as their own form of a “real family” (as Jeanie says when they are all getting ready for the Angel concert together her in room). The girls verbally express their desire to “have their own space” or “a place to go that is all their own” several times throughout the film. In one early scene, as the girls walk home from school, Jeanie says that she wishes they had “someplace to go” when it is “one o’clock in the morning and you just had a fight with your mom and there’s no place to go. Some place with like pillows around and a little music.” Her description demonstrates, again, the importance of music to the girls. In an attempt to secure money for “a place of their own,” when the girls go see the Angel concert, Jeanie gets the opportunity to go back stage and tell her absentee father (a rock band manager who is always on tour) that the girls just want “someplace where they can help each other.” Consequently, the film literally verbalizes and emphasizes the contrast between the “claustrophobic” domestic spaces with the wide-open spaces in the city, which highlights the conflict that the girls feel with their home lives and what fuels their desire to escape to a space that they create for themselves. This is similar to Nichols’s and Elsaesser’s observations that the settings of family melodramas are almost always “middle-class homes” in which “the contents of the home appear to be under pressure” and a source of “anxiety and constraint” for the characters (p. 165). Throughout the film, it is the four girls’ attempts to communicate with their parents and their connection to music/song lyrics that articulates the central thematic and ideological conflicts of the narrative and how the film offers a questioning of the girls’ place in the world (similar to the narrative journey of the teenage protagonists in Rebel Without A Cause and other youth/teen-centered films).

The four girls do finally get the opportunity to have “a place of their own” when Madge’s older boyfriend Jay (Randy Quaid) leaves town for work. Jay tells the girls they can stay at his
house while he is gone and they proceed to move in for the weekend. Reminiscent of the ending in *Rebel Without A Cause* however, it is only once the girls finally get a place of their own that they discover how unprepared they are for all of the responsibilities that come with it. For example, to prove that they are like “real grown-ups,” the girls throw what starts out as a “formal dinner” party at Jay’s house, where the girls wear evening gowns and their male friends wear tuxedos. The girls buy champagne and they all sit at the formal dining table to eat the meal they prepared. The party quickly turns into a house party that spirals out of control when hundreds of uninvited kids show up and destroy everything when a fight breaks out. The scene ends with a jump cut to the girls being detained at the police station after the party is broken up, which signals the beginning of the film’s third and final act.

The film’s conclusion also reinforces the narrative’s “melodramatic” focus on closely examining the girls’ lives as they are to forced to confront Jay and their parents and deal with the consequences of their disastrous house party. For example, shortly after being picked up at the police station it is revealed that Annie has been forced to check into a mental hospital (by her stepfather Frank). It is then revealed that Annie has run away when she calls Jeanie to come pick her up off the street. Jeanie goes out to look for her with their mutual friend Brad (Scott Baio) and they find her completely unintelligible from all of the drugs and alcohol she consumed after her escape from the hospital. Annie has one final confrontation with Jeanie about needing to “grow up” and get a job to pay Jay back for all of the damages to his house, before she chooses to once again run away from them when she hears sirens wailing somewhere in the distance (similar to the ones heard off-screen in the opening scene). Just as Plato gets shot down by the police on the steps of the planetarium mere seconds before he plans to surrender in the final scene of *Rebel Without A Cause*, Annie finally decides that she cannot keep running away from
her problems in the moments just before she is involved in a fatal car accident (while hitching a ride with a strange married couple who are driving under the influence). After watching Annie die in the emergency room at the hospital, the final scene of the film shows the girls all going their separate ways as they ultimately succumb to the pressures of their parents (and adulthood) by attempting to lead more “sensible” and “appropriate” lifestyles, in an attempt to avoid the same fate as Annie. In the final moments of the film, Madge gets married while continuing to haphazardly date men who have no real interest in her, and Jeanie is shown getting ready leave for college.

The film ends on a freeze frame of Jeanie visiting Annie’s grave while looking into the distance and contemplating her future, which suggests a moment of textual ambiguity and negotiation, similar to the subversive endings described by Elsaesser in the classical family melodramas of Sirk and Minnelli. The ambiguity of the final moment leaves the fate of the girls open, as it is up to the viewer to decide whether the girls end up finding family, stability, and fulfillment now that they have all been separated and interpellated into their “proper places” in the world, or if they will end up in the same position as Annie, who refused to conform to patriarchy’s role for her until it was too late. As the title of the film suggests, the female characters are not as innocent as they first appear. Similarly, as the quote in the title of this chapter suggests, the girls are struggling with who they are and who they want to be. Although they may have many of the responsibilities of adults, they are still just teenagers, who are shown struggling to navigate their world. 22 In the end, it could be argued that the girls’ desire to rebel

22 In line with this chapter’s reading of the film as a family melodrama, in his review of the film Ebert also described Foxes in the following way, “It’s a lot more serious, for example, than the hit Little Darlings (also released in 1980)...The movie is a rare attempt to provide a portrait into the way teenagers really do live today in some suburban cultures” (Rendleman, ch. 3).
against conformity is one of the main ways that the film challenges the dominant ideological norms of the time and most directly relates Foxes back to Elsaesser’s description of melodramas as texts that attempt to undermine and question the current cultural milieu (in terms of issues around gender roles, patriarchy, and identity formation in particular).

Following Foxes, Lyne’s second feature film Flashdance also focuses on the leading teenage female protagonist Alex Owens (Jennifer Beals), who attempts to enact her own form of “rebellion” and navigate her male-dominated landscape to escape from her repressive working class background and achieve her dreams of becoming a professional dancer. Due to the narrative’s focus on Alex’s dreams of class transcendence, it is interesting to note that in their 1990 book on the politics and ideology of Hollywood films of the 1970s and 1980s entitled Camera Politica, the film theorists Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner describe Flashdance (along with Rocky and Saturday Night Fever) as an example of what they broadly refer to as “a working class film” that attempts to communicate a dissatisfaction with working class life, the limitations that capitalism imposes, and points to the power of the need to overcome those limitations (p. 109). However, Ryan and Kellner also recognize that “working class films” are “the bearer of multiple and contradictory meanings” in that they can also be read as “reinforcing structural inequality by suggesting that those who get out of the working class are better, more endowed than their fellows” (p. 109). This is similar to Elsaesser’s description of family melodramas as texts that exhibit “a subversive charge…despite being radically ambiguous.”

Drawing on these kinds of readings, Flashdance can most accurately be described as a film that simultaneously challenges and reinforces the class system by showing Alex and her friends as

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23 In a review featured in Time Out, Foxes was also referred to as “an inverted Saturday Night Fever” (Foxes “Trivia” page, imdb.com). The connections between Foxes and Flashdance have therefore been alluded to in the past but never explicitly expressed as they have in this study.
they try to challenge the system and break out of the working class while also showing their attempts “to make something out of their lives” to be somewhat futile and self-serving in nature.

The class differences between Alex and the high art world of professional ballet dancing are communicated visually throughout the film in various scenes, including ones in which she goes to visit the Philadelphia Reparatory Ballet. For example, the first time Alex visits the school for an application she is shown looking up at the school in a low angle point-of-view shot and then from a high angle with the tall columns and pillars of the school towering over her, which makes her appear small and insignificant. After entering the building, Alex is surrounded by dancers in black leotards in pink tights with pinned and slicked back hair, which is in sharp contrast to her untamed black curls, steel-toed work boots, slightly oversized navy jacket, and jeans (Figure 9). Upon entering the admissions office, a slow tracking shot moves from right to left to show close-ups of her mud-covered work boots in juxtaposition to the pointe ballet shoes and high heels worn by every other girl in line for an application as they begin whispering about her to one another. She soon overhears the admissions secretary tell another applicant that they must list all of their training and dance experience, and Alex decides to leave, as she feels uncomfortable, out of place, and disheartened about her chances of making into the program.

In what could be described as one of the most “tense” scenes in the film, this sequence at the school establishes Alex’s feelings of “alienation” and characterizes her as an “outsider,” which allows the viewer a chance to sympathize with her desire to pursue her dreams as well as identify...
with the challenges she has to face along the way (as Ryan and Kellner suggest in describing the complicated between the viewer and the characters of “working class films,” pp. 109-121).

In addition to being considered a “working class film,” due to the foregrounding of class struggle, *Flashdance*’s focus on Alex’s journey of self-discovery and personal fulfillment also directly relates back to the description of melodrama as a “woman’s film” in that it prioritizes female subjectivity and agency (Byars and Doane). Similar to the relationship between the four girls in *Foxes* (and classical Hollywood family melodramas), Alex and her friends (who all work with her at Mawby’s bar) also make up their own form of an “urban family unit” as they bond and work together in their attempts to rise up from their working class roots and achieve their dreams over the course of the film. For example, Alex’s friend Jeanie (Sunny Johnson) aspires to become a professional ice dancer and Jeanie’s boyfriend Richie (Kyle T. Heffner) pursues a career as a stand-up comedian. Although the film somewhat splits the focus between Alex and her friends (similar to *Foxes*), it is Alex’s journey of self-discovery that predominantly structures the narrative. For example, the opening sequence in the film is similar to the opening of *Foxes* (and almost identical to the opening of *9½ Weeks*) in that it immediately takes the viewer into Alex’s world and establishes her as the primary character and active agent in the film, which further reflects Byars’s and Doane’s observations about melodrama as a form that prioritizes the female characters’ point of view and agency.

The first image of the film is a low angle shot of Alex on the top a hilly street set against the downtown Philadelphia skyline. At first, Alex appears as a shadowy figure in the center of the frame, slowly circling a kitten on her bicycle before stopping to pet it, which characterizes her as being warm and caring in nature from the moment the viewer is first introduced to her (this moment is pictured in Figure 10).
Figure 10: Similar to images of the fairytale princesses with their woodland animal friends in Disney’s *Snow White* (1937) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Flashdance* opens with a low angle shot of the female protagonist Alex in the center of the frame as she stops to pet a stray kitten in the middle of the street on her way to work, with the city as her own version of an “urban jungle” in the background.

Throughout the opening sequence, the Oscar winning theme song “Flashdance…What a Feeling” with lyrics by Irene Cara slowly builds on the soundtrack as the shadowy figure rides her bike in extreme long shots over bridges and through the city at sunrise. The sequence ends with the shadowy figure inside of a steel mill with a welding mask that says “Alex,” before she slowly lifts it to reveal her face to the viewer (Figure 11). This sequence also sets the tone for the film and constructs Alex’s world as somewhat hyperreal and fairytalesque in addition to being specifically “melo-dramatic” (Figure 11 also demonstrates the hyperrealism of Alex’s world). Consequently, from the opening sequence (and throughout the remainder of the narrative) Alex is established as a somewhat complex and contradictory character.

Figure 11: Pictured here, “Alex” blurs the lines between masculine and feminine in her outspoken and aggressive attitude as well as in her personal style of dress (her name also connotes androgyny). She challenges conventional expressions of gender and chooses to be her own person. By simultaneously working at a hyper-masculine job (the steel mill as a welder during the day) and a hyper-feminine job (Mawby’s as a dancer at night), Alex fluctuates between both worlds every day.

In relation to her complex and contradictory nature, Alex can be seen as both the most active agent in the film while still being somewhat at the mercy of her surroundings, similar to the teens in *Foxes* and the characters described by Elsaesser in classical Hollywood melodramas.
(p. 185). For example, while Alex can be described as an “object” of her male spectators’ and the viewers’ “gaze” when she is dancing at Mawby’s bar (or in her loft in several scenes throughout the film), it is important to note that she also chooses to take control of her life and makes every space her own in the film, including the Philadelphia Repertory Ballet (made so formidable at the start of the film). Alex admits that she feels empowered and in control on stage (rather than simply objectified) when she is talking with her boyfriend/boss Nick (Michael Nouri). In an emotional monologue, similar to the “emotional outbursts” of the characters in *Foxes* and classical Hollywood melodramas, Alex says the following,

> You go out there and the music starts, and you begin to feel it. And your body just starts to move. I know it sounds really silly, but something inside of you just clicks. And you just take off and you’re gone. It’s like you’re somebody else for a second…Some nights I just can’t wait to get out there, just so I can disappear.

In the same way that she professes to claim the stage for herself in this scene, other examples of Alex making (hyper-masculine and upper class) spaces her own include her bringing copies of *Vogue* onto the steel mill work site, working out at the gym with her girl friends from Mawby’s while gossiping about boy problems, and a scene in which she dresses in her own risqué version of a tuxedo in a high-class restaurant while fondling Nick under the table with her feet as she suggestively “sucks” on a piece of lobster. Consequently, it is Alex’s outspoken and aggressive attitude that helps her to negotiate with her repressive and restrictive environment throughout the film, similar to the four teens in *Foxes* and the “troubled” protagonists of classical Hollywood family melodramas.

> As discussed in the previous chapter, *Flashdance* has largely been written about as the epitome of a text that exhibits “style over substance” (Faludi and Wyatt). For example, the

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24 Several scenes in the film feature Alex in a confessional booth as she professes that she “just wants something more” out of life.
city/urban setting, soft-focus cinematography, chiaroscuro lighting, the various elaborate and iconic costumes that Alex wears (i.e. torn sweaters and jeans, leggings, leotards, the gender-bending tuxedo, etc.) and the music are all elements that contributed to it being dismissed as “high concept,” but they are also the elements that support reading the film as an example of “excess” and “dramatic mise-en-scène” in the melodramatic mode (Byars and Elsaesser). The role of music is so prominent that Flashdance has often been described as a “musical,” and music can be described its own “character” in the film. Similar to Foxes, the significance of (diegetic and non-diegetic) music in the narrative is arguably what most strongly contributes to reading the film as an example of Lyne’s brand of “melo-drama.”

The importance of music in Alex’s world is highlighted throughout the film in various ways. For example, when Nick first comes to her warehouse apartment, Alex lovingly recounts a childhood trip she took to the opera (a high class art form) with her family where her father told her “to close her eyes” and “see the music,” which she describes as a profound moment that led to her growing fascination with music and dancing. Furthermore, the music in the film functions as a correlate for the dream of class transcendence and inserts fantasy into the everyday routines of the characters. The film’s use of music breaks through the constraints of realism and offers a challenge to the classical Hollywood narrative structure to produce a more open and free textual space for personal expression, particularly for Alex (and her friends when they are performing in their various vocations).25

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25 Music (or “melos”) functions so strongly as a driving force of the film that Flashdance was adapted by Robert Cary and Tom Hadley as a stage production entitled “Flashdance: The Musical.” The show premiered at the Theatre Royal in Plymouth in the UK in July of 2008 and was later given a tour in the United States from 2013-2015. The stage production included several songs from the film including “Manhunt,” “Gloria,” and the title track “Flashdance…What A Feeling.” See the official website for further details about the musical version, http://www.flashdancethemusical.com/
In relation to the discussion of what function music has in *Flashdance* more specifically, it is important to note that Giorgio Moroder worked with Lyne for the second time and he is credited with producing original music for the film (arranged and conducted by Sylvester Levay). As mentioned above as it appears in the opening sequence, “Flashdance …What a Feeling” is the film’s theme song and serves as a leitmotif for Alex throughout the film, similar to “On The Radio” in *Foxes*. Both songs are whimsical in tone and provide a rhythmic structure for the narrative, which is similar to the function of the sweeping dramatic and operatic instrumental scores in classical Hollywood melodramas. Moreover, a majority of the songs on the soundtrack underscore Alex’s transformation over the course of the narrative. The music “rises-and-falls” as she moves from being shy and intimidated to a confident and ambitious young woman, in both her dancing ability and in her ability to pursue her dreams.

Mirroring the relationship that the four teens in *Foxes* have with music, the connection between Alex’s agency and music/dancing is also made in nearly every scene of the film. For example, the soundtrack includes an extensive list of other songs in addition to “Flashdance …What a Feeling” that blatantly showcase and articulate female (sexual) desire, empowerment, and agency as a central thematic concern of the film (many of them are also performed by women). Examples of the film’s women-centric (diegetic and non-diegetic) songs include “Lady, Lady, Lady,” “Gloria,” “Manhunt,” “He’s A Dream,” “Maniac,” “I Love Rock N’ Roll,” “Romeo,” and “Imagination.” The songs that follow Alex on her journey also highlight her ability to make every space her own and continuously motivate her on her journey to become a professional dancer. Alex’s self-expression and strong sense of empowerment through music and dancing is epitomized in the iconic audition sequence in the final moments of the film.
Following in the footsteps of Jeanie in *Foxes*, Alex is “successfully” able to negotiate with the restrictions and rules of her world in order to pull herself out of her working class “alienation” and become “something more.” In the final moments of the film, Alex runs excitedly out of her audition, where she finds her boyfriend Nick waiting for her (and her pit bull named Grunt) holding a bouquet of red roses (as per the tradition of dancers being given flowers after a performance). Like *Foxes* before it, *Flashdance* also ends on a freeze frame that features a two-shot of Alex and Nick in the center of the frame in which she hands him one of her roses (after he lifts and spins her in the air in celebration), thereby giving her the final action of the film and reaffirming her power (or literal upper-hand) in the relationship. However, this is also a moment of textual negotiation” (similar to the subversive “happy endings” described by Elsaesser) in that the viewer cannot know for sure what will happen to Alex in the future (p. 188). Put more complexly, the film is (“ambiguously”) left open to interpretation and one to can either choose to believe that Alex will go on to have success as a dancer or (take a more cynical stance and) assume that she is destined to fall back into her working class life after the narrative’s conclusion (Elsaesser, p. 169).

Comparable to *Foxes* and *Flashdance*, *Lolita* (Lyne’s seventh and penultimate feature film) also positions the eponymous young female protagonist as the dominant and most active character in the film. The narrative follows the fourteen-year-old Lolita as she attempts to navigate her way through adolescence and her conflicting and repressive relationship with her stepfather/lover Professor Humbert Humbert.²⁶ Despite the film being primarily mediated from

²⁶ Lolita’s age was changed from 12 to 14 for the film version in the hopes that the narrative’s sexual relationship would become more “palatable” for mainstream audiences and in an attempt to receive a more wide-spread/major theatrical release (showing that Lyne, once again, chose to compromise his artistic vision to meet the demands of the studios and the box office – similar to his “choice” to reshoot the ending of *Fatal Attraction*). Despite changing her age however, the film had considerable difficulty finding a distributor in America (James). It was not until the US premium cable network Showtime first released *Lolita* on the “small screen” that the film was given a limited theatrical release by the Samuel Goldwyn Company in order to qualify for awards (James). Stanley Kubrick’s 1962
the point of view of her stepfather, (as the title suggests) the film is focused around showcasing how Lolita challenges and manipulates Humbert to fulfill her own desires, both her sexual desires and her more general yearnings for material possessions (i.e. things teenagers take pleasure in such as candy, ice cream soda floats, magazines, etc.). Like the girls in *Foxes* and *Flashdance* before her, Lolita manipulates the space around her and makes it her own, in an attempt to negotiate with her surroundings as well as to advance her sexual prowess and attract men to her. As a result of her machinations, Humbert is passive and completely submissive to Lolita as he is controlled by his love and desire for her throughout the film. Ultimately, Lolita and Humbert “only have each other” for the majority of the film, as Humbert suggests in one scene, and the film’s central anxiety is located within their “unconventional” family unit, which is similar to the focus on familial dysfunction in classical Hollywood family melodramas as well as Lyne’s first two films. 

Although *Lolita* is set between 1947 and 1950 in various New England locales, the film’s themes and tone are both modern and timeless in that it addresses issues around class, gender, and sexuality that are present in both postwar America and in the context of late corporate

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version of *Lolita* also changed Lolita’s age from 12 to 14 to get past the strict censorship requirements of the MPPDA at the time. Despite their compromises, it is interesting to note that both film versions were attempting to push boundaries in exploring a taboo and transgressive form of sexuality, which made the films a financial risk as well as a risk for the directors’ reputations with audiences and critics. It is also interesting to note that Lyne worked for five years to get the film made (the producers rejected several versions of the screenplay that were written by more experienced screenwriters before Stephen Schiff was commissioned to write the final draft). The film’s long history to the screen shows Lyne’s dedication to the project and his willingness to fight for the film to get made (along with the rest of the production team and crew), despite the various obstacles that were encountered during its production and release (Emery).

27 The focus on anxiety located specifically within the family in Lyne’s films can also be read as a result of the emphases on neo-conservative “family values” in the early 1980s and 1990s, which is similar to the propagation of the “nuclear family” ideal in the 1940s and 1950s in American society and classical Hollywood films. Various other filmmakers that emerged during the same period that also explore anxiety within the family and the changing dynamic of families in American society as the New Millennium grew closer including the director David Lynch in *Blue Velvet* (1986), which also focuses (more intricately than Lyne’s films) on the conflation of ideological issues surrounding the family, adolescence, and identity in the 1950s and the 1980s in American culture (simultaneously).
patriarchal capitalism in the late 1990s when the film was released (1997). The film’s focus on love, loss, desire, freedom, and obsession are all “universal” themes that also reflect the “masochistic” nature of the melodramatic form, as described by Elsaesser (p. 186). In addition to situating Lolita within the somewhat conventional Hollywood narrative framework of melodrama, it is important to note that Lyne’s film adaptation is significantly different from Nabokov’s novel in that it is able to provide a visual representation of Lolita that exists independently of Humbert’s narrated description of her. Consequently, it is Lolita’s actions, not Humbert’s “unreliable narration,” that become a driving force of the narrative (although she is not necessarily given much of a literal “voice,” her actions frequently “speak” louder than her words and Humbert’s narration, and they often supersede them). For example, Lolita is the one who begins to “subtly flirt” with Humbert early in the film. Examples of Lolita’s “flirting” include her bumping her doll against Humbert’s thighs (while they are sitting on the porch swing), Lolita running into Humbert’s arms to kiss him before she leaves for summer camp, and one scene in which she goes so far as to crawl on top of Humbert in bed one morning to “teach him” about making love. Lolita is therefore deliberate in her actions and acutely aware of her effect on Humbert from the beginning of their relationship.

A third of the way through the film, once Lolita’s mother Charlotte (Melanie Griffith) dies, the narrative shifts to an intense focus on Lolita and Humbert’s relationship as they are the only “family” that either one of them has left. While it could be argued that Lolita is a “sexual object” or “possession” that Humbert covets and carries around with him across the country in their 1939 Ford V8 De Luxe Station Wagon, it is important to emphasize that she is the one who maintains the power in the relationship throughout the film. For example, Lolita is shown enjoying traveling across the country during summer before they arrive at Beardsley College.
(where Humbert begins his teaching assignment), and it is her decision to go back out on the road when her relationship with Humbert becomes too restraining and domesticated. Also in relation to Lolita’s ability to control her life and make her own choices, it is important to note that Lolita and Humbert fluctuate between operating on the level of father-daughter and lovers throughout the film, which creates a somewhat complex and contradictory power dynamic between them as Humbert constantly attempts to assert his authority over and care for her as her stepfather while also being undermined by his struggle to maintain their sexual-romantic relationship. In other words, their sexual relationship is completely dependent on Lolita’s “consent” (or “complicity”), not Humbert’s motives and desires.

Similar, again, to Alex in Flashdance (and Annie in Foxes in particular), there are several scenes where Lolita purposely chooses to “put herself on display” in order to manipulate the space around her, which further complicates and ambiguously eroticizes Lolita’s agency in the film (Figure 12). For example, the first time the viewer sees Lolita she is sprawled out on the grass and playfully kicking up her legs up as she lies on her stomach (Figure 12). In the frame behind her there is a sprinkler showering her with water, soaking her clothes to the point of making them translucent. After the camera lingers briefly on this image, there is a quick cut to a low angle shot of Humbert as he gazes across the lawn at her for the first time, completely mesmerized by Lolita. Although one could describe her as an “object of his gaze” in this scene, Lolita is shown rejoicing in her own little world as she reads her teen magazine, seemingly unaware of Humbert. Consequently, this scene exemplifies the somewhat contradictory and ambiguous eroticization of Lolita’s character for Humbert as well as the viewer throughout the film.
Figure 12: Pictured on the left is the first time the viewer (and Humbert) sees Lolita. Pictured on the right is one of the many instances where Lolita puts herself “on display” to coerce Humbert into giving her what she wants. In this scene, Lolita is sprawled out on a couch as she paints her toes and stretches out her bare legs (again), as she begs her father to let her participate in the school play.

Similar to these scenes pictured above, Lolita is shown indulging in her own forms of pleasure throughout the majority of the film. She is often playing games with her friends from school, dancing around, and she ultimately appears to be “unbothered” by her stepfather’s “obsession” with her. For example, in one of the more “subtle” sex scenes of the film, Lolita is shown reading a comic strip while she slowly rocks back and forth in a rocking chair. The camera slowly pans to reveal that Humbert is underneath her and that they are actually in the middle of a sensual and sexual exchange (it is unclear whether they are having intercourse). There is then a series of alternating close-ups of Humbert’s hands on her thighs, Lolita’s face as she simultaneously moans and laughs at the comic strip, and a jump-cut to a close-up of the slow creaking ceiling fan blades circling above them (which mimic the rhythm of the rocking chair). As exemplified in this scene’s juxtaposition of images, Lolita finds a way to negotiate with her situation and bring in her own forms of pleasure, even in the midst of her stepfather’s sexual “exploitation” of her over the course of the narrative.

The somewhat complex and contradictory power dynamic between Lolita and Humbert is demonstrated in the film in various ways other ways, as well. For example, Humbert’s submissive attitude towards Lolita is somewhat symbolically recreated in his first encounter with the playwright Clare Quilty (Frank Langella), who also ultimately bends to Lolita’s will. Humbert and Quilty meet one night on the back porch outside of their upscale hotel and an
electric blue bug zapper is shown in the background of the frame. The camera rapidly cuts between close-ups of Humbert’s sweat-drenched face and Quilty sitting in the shadows as suspense and tension builds while the two men discuss how intriguing and beautiful Lolita is. Countless moths and other bugs are heard loudly frying and the blue flames from the bug zapper light up the porch, which add to the suspenseful tone of the scene, and the nature of their relationship with Lolita is visually played out in that they can be read as literal “moths” to her “flame” in many ways. This scene can also be read as foreshadowing Quilty’s pursuit of Lolita as it literally takes place “in the shadows” and “behind-the-scenes,” which reaches its climax when he eventually “kidnaps”/”rescues” her (or “whatever you want to call it” as Humbert says in one scene) from her stepfather near the end of the film.

Similar to the (diegetic and non-diegetic) music in Foxes and Flashdance, music plays a prominent role in Lolita, which also relates back to “the structural and thematic use of music” in classical Hollywood family melodramas, as observed by Elsaesser (p. 174). The influential Italian composer Ennio Morricone composed, orchestrated, and conducted the bittersweet instrumental score for the film, which mirrors the tone of Humbert’s lyrical narration as well as his masochistic relationship with Lolita.28 The score “rises-and-falls” as his relationship with Lolita fluctuates between being blissful when they are on the road together to being miserable.

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28 Like Moroder, Morricone has also had a long and successful career in the music industry and he has continued to compose award-winning scores for A-list Hollywood directors since his work on Lolita. His career began in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Italy and he made a name for himself in the industry composing scores primarily for westerns, including frequent collaborations with the Italian director Sergio Leone. While westerns are not traditionally considered to be “melodramas” in the sense that they do not focus on female characters or subjectivity, they have been written about in more recent scholarly criticism as a distinct sub-genre referred to as “male melodramas” due to their focus on their rise-and-fall of the western male hero accompanied by music that mirrors the structure of the narrative (See Chapter 7 “The Romance Western” in David Lusted’s 2003 book The Western for further discussions of melodrama in relation to the western genre). Morricone’s score for Lolita is therefore comparable to the other films in the western genre (among others) that he has composed. Most recently, Morricone’s score for the 2015 Quentin Tarantino hybrid western-comedy-thriller The Hateful Eight won the 2016 Golden Globe Award for Best Original Score and the Academy Award for Best Original Score. He is therefore yet another one of the many prolific and successful composers to have collaborated with Lyne over the course of his career.
when they are domesticated and eventually separated at the end of the narrative. Music is also a form of expression for Lolita, like the girls in *Foxes* and Alex in *Flashdance* before her. For example, Lolita is often shown turning on the radio in the car or dancing around the house, not for the pleasure of Humbert, but for her own. She primarily chooses to play songs with an upbeat pop and chaotic jazz rhythm that reflect her carefree and open nature, including Ella Fitzgerald’s “T’aint What You Do (It’s The Way That Cha Do It)” and Lena Horne’s “Stormy Weather,” which also contribute to the film’s foregrounding of the female voice and Lolita’s expression of her youth and vitality. Furthermore, the instrumental score (played when Humbert is on-screen) often clashes with the jazz and pop songs (played by Lolita when she is on-screen) and the two musical forms combine to further reflect the nature of the film’s complicated and ambiguous “love” story.

At the narrative’s conclusion, despite Lolita’s ability to negotiate with her position and to find joy in her life as a “normal” American teenager (through her love of music and pop culture), the relationship between Lolita and the men in her life continues to be somewhat complex and contradictory, as she is still at their mercy in many ways. For example, Lolita’s narrative journey ends when Humbert comes to visit her and her husband (three years after she has convinced Quilty to take her away to live with him at his mansion). Shortly before his visit, it is recounted through Humbert’s voice-over narration that Lolita has sent him a letter that asks for him to send money as she is pregnant and trying to settle old debts in order to move away with her husband so that he can find a better job. By sending the letter, it can be argued that Lolita did not gain her freedom and that she ultimately falls back into the pattern of manipulating Humbert and being dependent on him for financial security (much like she did when she acted as his “daughter”). For example, Lolita goes so far as to refer to Humbert as “Dad” throughout the letter. In her final
scene, Lolita appears to have “matured” considerably, as she is shown with her hair pulled back and dressed in an oversized housecoat, pajamas, horn-rimmed glasses, and slippers (to suggest that she has become the epitome of a “stay-at-home” wife – pictured in Figure 13).

**Figure 13:** On Humbert’s final visit with her, Lolita is all “grown up” and expecting her first child. Like the four teens at the end of *Foxes*, Lolita appears to have given into patriarchal pressures and been put into her “proper place” in the home as a “modest” working class wife and mother. She appears to be content with her new roles and domestic life (despite her unconventional upbringing).

After graciously accepting his money, it is important to acknowledge that Lolita does reclaim some of her agency in this scene when she admits to Humbert that the only man she has ever loved is Quilty and that she is the one who orchestrated her escape with him. She also confesses that she was the one who ultimately chose to leave Quilty after refusing to participate in orgies and “child pornography” for him. At the end of his visit, Lolita asserts that she would rather go back to Quilty than resume her relationship with Humbert, even though he begs her to come away with him. The film ultimately offers some closure to her storyline in this scene. Her journey also comes “full circle” over the course of the narrative, as she is shown going from being a beautiful and presumptuous teen who has to negotiate with her stepfather to express herself and find fulfillment to being a grown woman who struggles with the responsibilities of adulthood. The film’s focus on Lolita’s transformation is similar to the narrative journeys of the female characters in *Foxes* and *Flashdance*, and is another example to support my argument for the understanding of Lyne’s films as incorporating elements of family melodrama or “women’s films” (and “coming-of-age” films) as a way to foreground and explore issues around the female characters’ subjectivity and agency.
The final scene of Lolita is also somewhat “subversive” (similar to *Foxes* and *Flashdance* as well as the classical Hollywood family melodramas). Nearly identical to the ending of Nabokov’s novel, it is revealed that both Humbert and Lolita died in 1950, nearly one month apart (the information is written out on-screen before the credit sequence). However, the revelation of their deaths is preceded by Humbert’s longing look into the distance (similar to Jeanie’s in the freeze frame at the end of *Foxes*), where children can be heard and laughing in a school yard at recess before there is a sudden cut to an early memory of Humbert’s that features Lolita around the time that he first met her, in a “pure” and idealized state (Figure 14). This moment exhibits a “subversive charge” in that the viewer is left with the lingering image of an imagined and “idealized” version of Lolita as she literally “haunts” the screen in its final moments. Consequently, this final image reinforces Lolita’s power over Humbert and reinstates her as the most dominating character in the film while also contradictorily suggesting that she is forever “trapped” within his memory. 29

![Figure 14: The “final” image of Lolita. Lolita is “frozen in time” in the mind of Humbert in her most “pure” and “innocent” state, while she once more dominates the frame and is shown looking up at Humbert (and into the camera at the viewer), forever “returning his gaze.”](image)

In conclusion to this section, it is important to restate that *Foxes*, *Flashdance*, and *Lolita* all demonstrate Lyne’s “brand” of family melodrama in that each film closely follows the female characters as they struggle with the “pains” of growing up and their attempts to break out of their daily “constrictions” and “alienation” to find a family, identity, and fulfillment in their

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29 Interestingly, after the credit sequence ends (thereby making the scene somewhat extra-textual), a brief flash of images appear that feature Lolita repeatedly throwing an apple up in the air and catching, which is also open to interpretation. For example, the fruit can be seen as symbolically representing her place in the narrative as a “ripe” and “forbidden fruit” but it can also be seen as giving her the final action in the film and further reinforce that notion that she has had to negotiate (or “juggle”) her way through her repressive relationship with the men in her life and the world around her in order to survive over the course of the narrative.
lives. Although they are somewhat limiting and constraining in ways, the diegetic worlds in Lyne’s films ultimately create an open textual space that allows for all of the fears, struggles, and desires of the female characters to be freely played out. These texts can therefore be read as encouraging sympathy and identification with the women across Lyne’s oeuvre.

As a way of setting up for the next chapter, it is also important to note that the “teen angst” that the characters feel in *Foxes, Flashdance*, and *Lolita* is similar to the anxiety that his male characters feel, but they are far less capable of coping with their frustrations. Therefore, following the same approach as this chapter’s in-depth discussion of Lyne’s complex and contradictory female characters, the next chapter analyzes the male characters as they struggle to express themselves and find fulfillment in their lives despite the constant crushing pressures of gender roles, patriarchy, and urban capitalism.

**Conclusion**

When looked at individually and in comparison to one another, it is becomes clear that Lyne’s films use melodrama to “expose cultural conflicts” and tensions present within American society as it changes and evolves over time, despite not being able to “completely lay them to bare” (Elsaesser, p. 165). As an extension of Elsaesser’s arguments about the ideological function of melodramatic texts, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith summarizes the “major thrust of the genre” in the following way in his article “Minnelli and Melodrama” (originally published in 1977),

> The importance of melodrama lies precisely in its ideological failure. Because it cannot accommodate its problems, either in a real present or in an ideal future, but lays them open in their shameless contradictoriness, it opens a space which most Hollywood forms have studiously closed off. (p. 194)
Like Elsaesser’s and Nichols’ descriptions of melodrama then, Nowell-Smith’s understanding of melodrama also relates to and summarizes my overarching goal of recognizing the “importance” of Lyne’s films in relation to how they explore issues around ideological norms that have gone “studiously closed off” in other mainstream texts and that have gone previously ignored in relation to his body of work in scholarly criticism up to this point. Although this chapter only analyzed a selection of films in Lyne’s oeuvre, all of his films display elements of melodrama in various forms, which can be explored in more detail and added to in future studies that choose to apply theories surrounding the melodramatic mode to open them up to further previously unexplored readings.
CHAPTER 3

“I’LL TELL YOU, MY DARLING, IT’S A HELL OF A LIFE”: HEGEMONIC
NEGOTIATION OF MASCULINITY AND THE CRITIQUE OF URBAN CAPITALISM

Figure 15: Just two “guys” sharing a drink and a smoke while venting about the daily grind of work, marriage, children, and the endless cycle of monotony that comes with them in 9½ Weeks (Lyne’s third feature film as a director).

Midway through their titular 9½ week affair, Elizabeth (Kim Basinger) teasingly admits to her enigmatic lover John (Mickey Rourke) that she has always wondered about what it would be like to “be one of the guys,” which occurs while they are on a date in a smoky barroom full of men on Wall Street (the epicenter of urban capitalism in the Western world). In the following scene, Elizabeth goes up to their hotel room and discovers that John has responded to her request by sending her a man’s tuxedo, a fake mustache, a hat, and a note that tells her to get dressed and meet him in the lobby.30 After she makes her way downstairs, Elizabeth briefly laughs with John about her appearance before there is a quick cut to a long tracking shot through a crowded upscale restaurant that ends on a two-shot of the couple sitting together, which visually reflects the notion that Elizabeth (and the viewer) is being “taken into” his world. John puts his arm around Elizabeth, while he lights a cigar (an archetypal phallic symbol) for them both, before he

30 This scene is also interesting to single out in that it can be read as one of several instances in Lyne’s films in which gender is blurred/gender is shown to be a “masquerade” or “performance,” which is also a somewhat subversive concept (Butler first discussed this notion in her 1990 book Gender Trouble – see this study for further reference). By “dressing up” as a man, Elizabeth can experience part of what it is like to be “looked at” by passers by as “one of the guys.” Another example of the deconstruction of gender roles in one of Lyne’s films is a brief scene in Flashdance in which Alex dresses up in a feminized tuxedo while out at an upscale restaurant with her boss/boyfriend Nick, as discussed in Chapter 2. Zalman King’s film Wild Orchid (1990) also features a scene where the two lead female protagonists dress up in tuxedos and mustaches and attempt to defy gender stereotypes and conventions (this link is important to note as King and Patricia Knopp were co-screenwriters for 9½ Weeks and Wild Orchid, as mentioned in Chapter 1).
proceeds to reveal how he feels about his everyday life (pictured in Figure 15). In a somewhat extensive monologue, John says the following,

I'll tell you, my darling, it's a hell of a life. You work and work and work. You meet with people that you don't like, that you don't know. That you don't even want to know. And they try to sell you things. You try to sell them things. Then you go home at night, listen to the wife nag, the kids bitch. You turn up the TV. You tune everything out. You get up the next day and you start over again.

Interestingly, this is one of the only moments in the film in which John seemingly reveals any “personal information” about himself and this scene is important to analyze closely in that his “confession” ultimately attempts to articulate his frustration with the pressures and stresses that come with fulfilling his role as the “breadwinner” for his family. Consequently, this is a somewhat subversive moment in the film in that John does not simply reinforce or confirm Elizabeth’s assumption that he is satisfied with his life as the patriarchal, or masculine ideal (i.e. rich, white, heterosexual, and male), instead, he explains that he is deeply resentful and critical of his position.

Although the scene is somewhat undermined by ironic undertones, John’s description of his life is applicable to all of the male protagonists in Lyne’s films in that each of them experiences some form of “hell” over the course of their respective narratives (both literally and figuratively as explained throughout this chapter). Therefore, this scene in 9½ Weeks is singled out to begin this chapter as John’s expression of anxiety and frustration with his place in patriarchy is representative of what I argue is the second “signature” thread present across

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31 The cigar in this scene is significant to point out in that it represents an archetypal phallic symbol and smoking cigars is a characteristic “male bonding” activity that goes back to late nineteenth and early 20th century aristocratic practices. The snifter glasses of whisky that the couple sips on in this scene are also phallic symbols that harken back to old-fashioned all-male bonding activities. In other words, the “minute details” of this scene add to the façade that Elizabeth is a “male” friend of John’s whom he is sharing a drink with after work and shows the lengths that John has gone to in an attempt to immerse her in his world. The use of “gendered” props to further “dress up” this particular scene also alludes to its attempts to critique traditional gender roles and expose gender as a performance.
Lyne’s oeuvre to be explored in this study, which is the simultaneous hegemonic negotiation of masculinity and the critique of urban capitalism. The specific films that are primarily discussed throughout this chapter in relation to Lyne’s second “signature” thread are: 9½ Weeks, Jacob’s Ladder, and Indecent Proposal. Although each of Lyne’s other films also critically explore ideological issues surrounding the male characters to some extent, the ones focused on in this chapter more predominantly portray the male protagonists as complex and contradictory figures who find themselves feeling anxious, paranoid, and lost in their constantly evolving and increasingly repressive cultural landscapes (which is similar to the angst and struggles of the teenage female protagonists in Foxes, Flashdance, and Lolita discussed in the previous chapter).

As stated in Chapter 1, the unique postmodern blending of noir elements present across Lyne’s oeuvre is the primary theoretical focus of this chapter and yet another approach to analyzing how his films can be read as attempting to raise questions about issues surrounding gender, sexuality, and class. Similar to the history of melodrama, there has been extensive debate in scholarly criticism about whether or not film noir can be considered a “genre” per se and various theorists have written about noir as a “slippery” and flexible form of categorization (Williams, p. 390). Since the classical period however, numerous (stylistic, thematic, and ideological) constants of film noir have been identified (as noir has continued to be referenced in recycled in today’s cinema) and several theoretical works on the form’s staple elements are discussed in relation to Lyne’s films throughout this chapter.

32 In other words, it is important to note that unlike other classical Hollywood genres such as “westerns” and “musicals”, film noir was not initially an industry category, as the labeling of these texts came after they were created, without the directors or screenwriters necessarily consciously attempting to draw on the conventions of an established “genre” (Williams, p. 358). The emergence of “neo-noirs” (or après-noir texts – “after noir”) are therefore sometimes argued as texts that mostly strongly contribute to film noir being understood as a “genre” as they are conscious of their application of noir’s style and themes rather than as texts that are given retrospective identification by critics and scholars, such as the classical Hollywood noir films (Williams, p. 358).
The term “film noir” translates to “black film or cinema” (“black” in relation to both form and content) and was coined by French film critics to describe a cycle of Hollywood films released in France after World War II that were “questioning the ideals of American capitalism” and “painting a picture of American life as grubby, dark, and filled with greed and selfishness,” thereby accentuating the “darker” side of human existence by offering a more critical (and “cynical”) view of “modern day” American life (Benshoff and Griffin, p. 40 and p. 179). Similar to this description of film noir, Lyne’s films can also be read as “painting” a “dark” and “grubby” or “hellish” picture of “American life”– as this chapter is focused on discussing.

The Rise of “Neo-Noir”: Tracing Lyne’s “Dark” Roots

Coinciding with the beginning of Lyne’s career in Hollywood in the 1970s and early 1980s, a “reinvention” (or “resurgence”) of film noir began to emerge in the work of various mainstream and independent directors, which partly explains the prominent influence of film noir on his films (Abrams, p. 7). This “reinvention” of film noir is now referred to in scholarly criticism as “neo-noir” (Abrams, p. 7).


34 The noir form has also emerged in television over the last few decades. Some of the most recent examples include HBO’s True Detective (2014-), Fox’s Gotham (2014-), and USA’s Mr. Robot (2015-). This evolution of the form demonstrates the flexibility and popularity of noir as well as its enduring capacity to express and explore issues present in the contemporary culture.
According to Linda Ruth Williams, “neo-noir first developed as an homage to a beloved genre and as a marketing device” (p. 358). Writing on the origin and common traits of neo-noir more specifically, Williams states that,

The term neo-noir (or après-noir) came to prominence in the early 1970s and 1980s, to describe a new cycle of films, usually crime thrillers, generically ‘knowing’ in their quotation of the styles and themes of 1940s and 1950s film noir. Often strung around a suspense narrative, neo-noir films often feature hard-boiled voiceovers, femmes and hommes fatales [sic], sometimes switchback plots, and often set in urban locales. (p. 358)

Similar to Lyne’s films, neo-noirs also often blend classical and baroque elements of noir to explore issues around “masculinity in crises” and offer a critique of patriarchy and American (white/Eurocentric) urban capitalism.

As Williams also notes, neo-noir has continued to develop and be used as a loose “umbrella term” under which various other cycles and subgenres of films have been grouped under (including the “erotic thriller”) and the form often emerges and becomes popular in times of “heightened paranoia,” such as post-World War II during the classical period and the various cultural crises in America in the 1980s through the early 2000s (p. 358 and 359). These “cultural crises” include the conservative political agenda of Ronald Reagan, the backlash to second wave feminism, and the horrific events surrounding 9/11, among others, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Therefore, the connections between Lyne’s “dark” worlds and the real life cultural crises that

35 Interestingly, Williams also notes that the film scholar Andrew Spicer has argued that there are two distinct periods of neo-noirs; modernist (the 1970s and early 1980s) and postmodernist (the 1980s through today). Examples of the “modernist” neo-noirs include Chinatown (1975), Looking for Mr. Goodbar (1977), and Eyes of Laura Mars (1978) (p. 358). In addition to the one’s listed in this paragraph, other texts have also been identified as postmodernist examples of neo-noirs, in both American cinema and other national cinemas. See Spicer’s in-depth study Film Noir (2002) for further examples and complex analyses of film noir and neo-noir texts.

36 While this study focuses on the resurgence of film noir in American films, there are various other national films that also have their own variations of “neo-noir” during this 1980s through to today. See Andrew Spicer’s Film Noir (2002) for examples of neo-noir in other countries and the various possible cultural factors that led to them.
were occurring during this period are important to recognize when teasing out the connections between his films and noir’s function within them.

To extend her observations about the resurgence of noir in the 1980s and 1990s, Williams observes that “neo-noirs often exhibit postmodern reflections on what it means to update noir tropes in a way that is relevant to late twentieth century Western culture” (p. 358). This postmodern conflation of noir elements described by Williams is applicable to Lyne’s films in that they can be seen as drawing on conventions of classical film noir to comment on the anxieties and changes in the 1980s that have continued to grow in today’s post-9/11 American film and television culture. Furthermore, Williams’s description of neo-noir is particularly important to understand when considering how noir is reflected in Lyne’s oeuvre in *Lolita* and *Jacob’s Ladder* as they are set in post-World War II America in the 1950s and in the early 1970 during the Vietnam War, respectively. So, although these films are set in the “past,” they are similar to Lyne’s other films in that they can be read in relation to how they represent and hegemonically negotiate with ideological issues around gender roles and urban capitalism existent in the “present” era in which they were released, regardless of the era in which they are set.

Additionally, Williams states that “like film noir, neo-noir can be interpreted as a revealing symptom or cultural sore spot that bears out underlying anxieties,” including anxieties specifically focused around gender, class, and sexuality (p. 358). Williams’s description is therefore comparable to Elsaesser’s description of melodrama in the previous chapter as “a specific mode of cinematic expression” that is capable of “expressing repressed tensions and anxieties about the current cultural milieu even as they are unable to completely lay bare the cultural conflicts that energize them” (p. 165). Consequently, melodrama and noir can both be
understood as “subversively charged” in that they are capable of drawing attention to the “darker” and more “convoluted” aspects of American ideologies, but not necessarily capable of completely overturning them (p. 169). Williams’s theorization about the “subversive” potential of noirish texts also applies to this chapter’s argument that Lyne’s films exhibit a “signature” attempt to create a textual space where various tensions and anxieties around masculinity and capitalism in “modern day” America can be articulated and played out (Benshoff and Griffin, p. 40 and p. 179).

Echoing Williams’s work on neo-noir, Jerold J. Abrams’s chapter “Space, Time, and Subjectivity in Neo-Noir Cinema” in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir* (2007, edited by Mark Conrad) is another primary source that informs this chapter’s analysis of Lyne’s films’ noirish inflections and their ideological implications. In writing about the evolution of noir, Abrams identifies two distinct differences between classical film noir and neo-noir texts; they are (1) “setting” and (2) “character” (p. 7). Drawing on Abrams’s work, the following sections discuss the subversive ideological functions of the noirish “settings” and male “characters” in Lyne’s films.

**The Cities That Never Sleep: The Expressive Noirish Landscapes of Lyne’s Films**

The city (along with various other urban locales) has always been one of the most distinct features of film noir. First appearing in silent cinema and in films made as part of the German Expressionist Movement, such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Cagliari* (1919, directed by Robert Wiene) and *Metropolis* (1927, directed by Fritz Lang), the city quickly began to function as a “character” itself in many ways and it was often used to visually communicate and reinforce a film’s themes
and characters. In writing about the influence of German Expressionism’s “anti-realist aesthetic” on the horror genre for example, the film scholar Mark Jancovich argues that the stylistic manipulation of the city as a “dark and distorted place” was originally employed to “outwardly reflect worlds that were internally awry” and to create a space within the diegesis where the horrors explored within these films is set “within the normal and everyday” rather than in some “exotic never-never land” (p. 3). This relates to the focus on the “everyday anxieties” present within “modern” American metropolises as they have appeared over the history of the noir form as well as those that serve as the backdrops for Lyne’s films (which is why this chapter emphasizes how his films reflect on issues around masculinity raised specifically within American “urban” capitalist centers).

Ryan and Kellner also (whose book is cited in the previous chapter) describe the worlds of classical film noir in the following way,

Traditionally the film noir of the late forties and early fifties depict a dark world of contending, sometimes ambiguous, moral forces, in which deception, treachery, and murder are commonplace…the style is usually characterized by night shooting, dark shadows, sharp lighting contrasts, askew camera angles, symbolic environments and convoluted narratives. (p. 83)

Consequently, these theorists’ observations about the common settings and “symbolic environments” of German Expressionist and early noir films can be directly applied to describe the worlds in Lyne’s films as they are all set in urban metropolises and industrialized towns. In his study of the form, Abrams also notes that “much of the time, classic film noir takes place in

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37 Other examples of German Expressionist films that utilize the city and overtly expressive landscapes include The Student of Prague (1913, directed by Stellan Rye and Peter Wegener), The Golem (1920, directed by Paul Wegener) and Nosferatu (1922, directed by F.W. Murnau).

38 The focus on the setting in German Expressionism and film noir is also similar to the use of “stylistic excess” and (or the use of the “form-as-content”) as a way of communicating and reinforcing a films’ themes and ideological concerns in films made as a part of the cinema-du-look movement and classical Hollywood melodramas as discussed in Chapter 1 and 2.
Los Angeles - but it’s always in the city, always detectives looking for clues to unravel the mystery of whodunit” (p. 7). In an attempt to more specifically describe the setting of neo-noir texts, Abrams argues that “what used to be the contemporary ‘space’ of Los Angeles city now becomes the ‘time’ of the distant future past” (p. 7). In Lyne’s diegetic worlds, the city is also a place where “time” and “space” is conflated and the settings of his films often “outwardly” reflect his male protagonists’ “inner” angst.

The settings for all of Lyne’s films are as follows: Los Angeles/the San Fernando Valley (Foxes), Pittsburgh (Flashdance), New York (9½ Weeks, Fatal Attraction, Jacob’s Ladder, and Unfaithful), Las Vegas (Indecent Proposal), and a fast-growing suburb and bustling college town in 1950s New England (Lolita). Each of these films similarly feature crowded streets of people and tall buildings that tower over the characters, which positions them as small, inferior, and insignificant in comparison to their surroundings. These dark and compact spaces contribute to the anxious and paranoid nature of Lyne’s male characters as well as the males that commonly populate film noir and neo-noir texts. Although Lolita is somewhat different than Lyne’s other films in that it is the vastness of the open highway and long stretches of country roads that seem to “swallow” Humbert and he is put into various “claustrophobic” spaces throughout the narrative. These include sequences in which Humbert and Lolita spend long hours and days in the car when they are traveling across the country for the summer (the film is a “road movie” in a sense) and the countless rundown motels that they stop at when they are trying to escape from “the mysterious man” who is following them over the second half of the film.

While it could be argued that the importance of the “city” in Lyne’s films first appeared in Foxes and Flashdance, it continued to evolve and reach a new level of narrative significance in 9½ Weeks. From the opening sequence (in which the camera follows Elizabeth on her walk to work
through downtown) on, the city becomes a somewhat living and breathing entity, and often acts as a driving force for the leading characters’ relationship throughout the film. To take this point further, various locales around New York (i.e. Coney Island, a clock tower, dark alleyways, etc.) act as a “playground” for John and Elizabeth in the early days of their affair (Figure 16). For example, the first few times the characters “spot” each other is during “chance” encounters at a butcher shop in Chinatown and later at a street fair, which are both instances in which the “city” (or fate) can be seen as actively attempting to bring the couple together in the midst of warm and bright (or more welcoming and nurturing) spaces (Figure 16).

![Figure 16: The city is a living and breathing entity in the lead couples’ relationship in 9½ Weeks. From their trip to the pier on the outskirts of the city to their sexual encounter inside a clock tower, Elizabeth and John come to view the city as their “playground,” where they feel free to act out and explore their sexual fantasies.](image)

However, once their relationship is at its breaking point, the cityscape appears darker and more threatening. Near the end of the film for example, John chases Elizabeth through the city and they are shown brushing against the crowd in the literally more “shady” and dangerous parts of town where there are countless pornography shops and strip clubs shown in the background. To add to the tension and drama, these sequences are also shot in chiaroscuro lighting (also a staple element of film noir) with a high contrast of light to dark shadows being cast on both the characters and their surroundings, which also outwardly reflects the couple’s inner turmoil and foreshadows the end of the relationship in the following scenes.  

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39 The influence of the city on their relationship is also highlighted (somewhat heavily-handedly) in the film by the Eurhythmics song “This City Never Sleeps” (first released in 1983). The song plays non-diegetically on the soundtrack as Elizabeth fantasizes about John at the art gallery where she works one afternoon in a somewhat early...
Developing beyond the narrative and thematic significance of the urban environments in 9 ½ Weeks, Jacob’s Ladder (Lyne’s fifth feature film) also suggests the dominating power that the city has over the characters within Lyne’s diegetic worlds. In relation to how the city reflects the psyches of characters in classical film noir texts, the film scholar Beverly Carter states that “the dark streets become emblems of alienation; a figure’s unrelenting gaze becomes obsessive; the entire environment becomes hostile, chaotic, deterministic,” which is one way of describing the “dark” and “chaotic” world of Jacob’s Ladder (p. 87). In nearly every scene, the “discomfort” and “alienation” that the titular male protagonist Jacob Singer feels after he “returns” home from the war is reflected in the various gritty and dilapidated urban locales around New York City, a distorted version of an “urban jungle” and what is soon revealed to be his literal “hell on earth” (Figure 17). Examples of the various “hellish” places Jacob goes to include an abandoned subway station, a downtown studio apartment/loft for a party, and his frequent visits to a “veteran’s hospital.”

![Figure 17](image)

Figure 17: The city appears to be “closing in” on Jacob Singer after he returns home from the war in Jacob’s Ladder. Pictured here, the sites and streets of New York transform into the setting for his “nightmarish” journey through “hell.”

There are also a variety of sequences in which Jacob “believes” that he is struggling from PTSD and he begins to intermittently “imagine” that he is being chased through the streets of New York.

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stage of their affair. Along with reflecting the tone of the scene, the words of the song (i.e. “I guess it’s just a feeling...in the city) blatantly articulate the mix of excitement and danger that the city represents for the characters and further demonstrate the conscious use of the city as an active and expressive element of Lyne’s films, which is similar to the city’s function in other noirish texts and further relates back to the use of “melo-drama” in Lyne’s films to add another layer of meaning in a scene (as discussed in the previous chapter).
York by mysterious dark and monstrous “figures” or “demons” throughout the narrative (which is discussed further in the following section). Consequently, this film also directly reflects theories surrounding how the city functions thematically in noirish texts and is exemplary of how the setting reflects the paranoid and fragile states of the male characters in Lyne’s films, in particular.

Following *Jacob’s Ladder*, in *Indecent Proposal* (Lyne’s sixth feature film) the city is once again portrayed as a “dark” and “hostile” place, where the anxieties of modern American urban capitalist culture can be played out. For example, it is only once the “happily” married couple David and Diana venture outside of their picturesque home in California to travel to Las Vegas (often colloquially referred to as “sin city”) that their relationship begins to “come under pressure” (which is also how Nichols describes expressive settings in classical Hollywood melodramas, as stated in the previous chapter). In contrast to the scenes in Las Vegas, the scenic sweeping shots of piers and beaches along the Pacific coast are romanticized through soft-focus cinematography and underscored with a bittersweet instrumental score. However, once the couple arrives in Las Vegas (in an attempt to win money to pay off their bank loans and buy their “dream house”), the overcrowded hotel casinos and the “chaotic” city streets of the iconic Las Vegas strip slowly begin to reflect the panic and terror experienced by the lead male protagonist David after their marriage begins to unravel.

One notable scene set in Las Vegas follows David as he decides to frantically run around the city looking for his wife after he changes his mind about their million-dollar arrangement with the billionaire John Gage (he gets one night alone with her). David is shown covered in sweat as he pushes past waves of people on the crowded casino floor. After a few moments, he comes to a stop in front of a bank of monitors used to bet on horse racing when he begins to
hallucinate and project images of a seemingly “unidentifiable” man and a woman having sex on all of the screens, as if to suggest that his “inner” anxiety has begun to “outwardly” surround him (Figure 18). At the climax of this sequence, David is shown running in front of The Mirage, where fire and lights emanating from the hotel’s iconic water fountain are reflected on his face in a close-up, thereby further accentuating his panic for the viewer. Like Jacob’s Ladder before it then, this sequence in Indecent Proposal demonstrates Carter’s observation that the city is made into a threatening and hazardous place for the male protagonists in noirish texts, as the city becomes a “chaotic” and “hostile” place for David (p. 87).

Moreover, at the end of this sequence, David is rendered helpless and passive once he realizes that all he can do is “wait” for his wife to come back. After finding his way back to his hotel room (that his wife’s “suitor” paid for), David is shown sitting on the floor in front of the bed that his as he slowly and repeatedly opens and closes the curtains with a remote control (Figure 19). This is both a monotonous and somewhat ironic task in that having a room with such accouterments is both a reminder of his lack of affluence to afford such luxuries and a reminder of the pointlessness of such materialistic expenses. Consequently, the setting and the characters’ surroundings are again given a thematic significance in Indecent Proposal, which further demonstrates the conscious use of expressive mise-en-scène in the construction of Lyne’s noirish diegetic worlds and reflects the way the setting specifically affects the narrative construction of the male characters in his films.
Figure 19: David “helplessly” sits in his luxurious upscale hotel room until the sun comes up as he waits for his wife to come back from her night away with John Gage.

Interestingly, the feeling of fear and panic in the city felt by the male protagonists is in stark contrast to how the women tend to engage with the settings in Lyne’s diegetic worlds. The same city streets that cause the male characters in Lyne’s films to feel trapped and anxious are shown to nurture and protect the women and act as a space where they can freely explore their identity and sexuality, as discussed in the previous chapter. Common city spaces inhabited by the female characters in Lyne’s films’ diegetic worlds include industrial warehouses (*Flashdance* and *9½ Weeks*) and domestic spaces (i.e. downtown apartments in high rise buildings), where they are often shown flourishing in their love life and in their work. For example, in her various treks across the city of Philadelphia in *Flashdance*, Alex and her friend Jeanie happen upon break-dancers free styling on the streets and a street cop directing traffic, who both influence her dancing, including the choreography in her audition at the end of the film (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Unlike the men, the women in Lyne’s films often find inspiration and empowerment in the city.

Another example is the scene in *9½ Weeks* in which Elizabeth decides to challenge a group of men to a fight after they yell homophobic slurs at her and John while she is dressed up as man. The couple is chased through several dark alleys before they are forced to fight off the
men in a small dark alleyway. They proceed to have sex on the stairs under a rain gutter in celebration of fending off the muggers and Elizabeth is shown dominating the center of the frame throughout the sequence as she basks in the danger and excitement of the city (Figure 20). Consequently, the differences in the way the men and women react to their surroundings in Lyne’s films further demonstrates the power dynamics between the characters and reinforces the role that the characters’ environments play in decoding meaning within the narrative in relation to gender politics.

To summarize this section, the somewhat menacing and hyperreal way that the city is portrayed in Lyne’s films in the context of the late 1980s and early 1990s is indicative of ideological changes (around gender in particular) in western culture and represents a questioning of those changes (Williams, p. 358). As Abrams suggests when observing how the deterioration of traditional American values and ideals has been visually represented over the history of the noir form, recognizing how the city shapes the actions and relationships of the male characters in neo-noir is key to understanding how these films operate on an ideological level and is one of the ways that neo-noirs differ from classical film noir texts (“setting” was the first difference and “character” is the second, p. 7). In contrast to the classical period of noir, Abrams also argues that “the city seems to fly apart at the edges” in neo-noir as a result of capitalism’s status as a superpower in the late 20th century, and suggests that because their worlds are “collapsing” around them, the male characters in these films are left with the task of putting their lives back together in the face of new patriarchal pressures. This relates to the second difference between classical film noir and neo-noir that Abrams identifies concerning the male characters’ function within the narrative, as he states that,

…rather than looking for a criminal in the city that surrounds him, now the detective’s search is for himself, for his own identity and how he may have lost it. Or, to put the
same point another way, the classic noir detective is a hardened stoic – not a flat character (mind you), but hardly conflicted in Shakespeare’s sense. With neo-noir however, that is precisely the point. The character is ‘divided’ against himself, although not so much emotionally, as in Shakespeare, as epistemologically; divided in time as two selves, and one is looking for the other. (p. 7)

Drawing on Abrams’ observations, the same feeling of being lost and “searching for oneself” as a reaction to the crushing pressures of patriarchy and modern day American living is what can be described as the primary motivation behind the male characters in Lyne’s films. Furthermore, as stated at the beginning of this chapter, it is important to acknowledge that the “divided” nature of Lyne’s male protagonists is one way that his films consistently attempt to challenge ideological norms around gender roles and expectations in the context of modern day urban capitalism, which is the focus of the following section’s analyses (Abrams, p. 7).

The Noirish Nature of 9½ Weeks, Jacob’s Ladder, and Indecent Proposal

Similar to Abrams’ description of the male characters in neo-noir as perilously searching for themselves amidst the chaos of the modern world, the film theorist Andrew Spicer also examines the “fatalistic” and “divided” characterization of the male protagonists that commonly appear in noirish texts in his chapter “Problems of Memory and Identity in Neo-Noir’s Existentialist Antihero” (2007, also published in The Philosophy of Neo-Noir). Spicer begins his chapter with a discussion of the noirish male’s most common character traits and pointedly remarks that,

One of the most arresting traits of film noir is the depiction of male protagonists who lack the qualities (courage, incorruptibility, tenacity, and dynamism) that characterize the archetypal American hero…Typical male noir protagonists are weak, confused, unstable, and ineffectual, damaged men who suffer from a range of psychological neuroses and who are unable to resolve the problems that they face. (p. 47)
Comparable to the way that the male characters appear in the neo-noir texts written about by both Abrams and Spicer, Lyne’s films also position the men as the more vulnerable and “feminized” characters. In relation to Spicer’s description more specifically, the men in Lyne’s films are also often presented as “weak,” “damaged,” passive, muted (or literally voiceless at times), and emotionally, mentally, and physically stunted in their futile attempts to “resolve the problems they face” (Spicer, p. 47). Both Abrams’ and Spicer’s arguments are primarily drawn upon throughout this section to inform the analysis of Lyne’s films and the male protagonists of 9½ Weeks, Jacob’s Ladder, and Indecent Proposal. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, these three films provide a diverse display of what I argue is the “signature” noirish way that Lyne’s films attempt to hegemonically negotiate with masculinity and offer a critique of urban capitalism.

Starting with 9½ Weeks, Lyne’s films began to more intimately and explicitly explore the “damaging” effects that the modern world can have on the male characters’ “sense of self” and “masculine identity” (Abrams, p. 7; Spicer, p. 47). For example, although the film is predominantly mediated from Elizabeth’s point of view, John often attempts to articulate how various patriarchal pressures (such as the responsibilities of his corporate job on Wall Street) causes him anxiety and distress in the moments when they are not together (similar to the monologue quoted at the beginning of the chapter). Another particular instance of this is the first time Elizabeth and John go on a “date.” In this scene, John takes Elizabeth to a friend’s houseboat so that they can be alone and tension builds throughout the sequence as she begins to ask him questions about his personal life. Her first question is “what do you do?” and he cleverly responds by saying “I buy and I sell money” (continuing on to say that “some people call it arbitrage”). She then jokingly asks him if he “sleeps with a phone under his pillow” to which he
sheepishly says, “No, I don’t do that…I used to do that…I don’t have to do that now,” thereby giving her (and the viewer) the first hint about how his corporate job and “yuppie” (young urban professional) lifestyle have dominated and negatively affected his life and sense of well-being.40

To take this point further, John’s frustration with his overall position within patriarchy can be directly related back to Abrams’ observation about the conflicted state of male characters in neo-noir as the pressures of John’s job and personal life seem to “divide him” against his self. John’s fractured psyche is most pertinently reflected in the couple’s power dynamic throughout the film (Abrams, p. 7). For example, rather than being open and honest with Elizabeth, John feels the need to make every encounter they have a game in order to “mask” his vulnerability and maintain the “illusion” that he is the one in control in their relationship, such as their date in the restaurant suggests, as described at the beginning of the chapter. Ironically however, John’s behavior ultimately magnifies his insecurities and reinforces the notion that fear and anxiety are the primary motivation behind his characters’ actions throughout the film, similar to the noirish male protagonists who came before him (as described by both Abrams and Spicer).

Shortly before the restaurant scene for example, there is a brief sequence in which John takes Elizabeth shopping for new clothes. The scene begins with a tracking shot of Elizabeth in the foreground of the frame as she looks in the mirror and tries on a somewhat posh and trim gray suit jacket and skirt ensemble, while John is shown sitting in the background watching her. She turns to “meet his gaze” before she hesitantly asks “John, aren’t you gonna ask me how I like this?” He then proceeds to pay for the suit before he responds to her questions with a curt

40 Similar to this exchange, in a later scene John once again “jokes” about his job when he says that he has “come close to a heart attack” while watching the stock reports on television when Elizabeth first visits his swanky penthouse apartment in downtown New York City. The apartment is fitted with modern décor (including an awkward lounge chair that Elizabeth comments on early in the scene) and smooth and sleek surfaces that lack any personality or warmth, which symbolically reflects his character’s attitude within the mise-en-scène, similar to the way that the city is portrayed as his relationship with Elizabeth begins to deteriorate.
“No,” as this scene also reflects the notion that John is ultimately trying to “dress up” Elizabeth (yet again) as a way of molding her to fit his lifestyle as well as continue to assert his “dominance” over her.

However, shortly after their shopping trip, John and Elizabeth’s relationship begins to disintegrate as she starts to challenge his control over her. For example, Elizabeth goes against John’s “request” to keep their private and professional life separate when she decides to visit him at work one afternoon. This sequence begins with a long shot of Elizabeth following John through the crowded city streets to a large corporate building (that towers over them in the frame) before she is shown hurriedly racing through the lobby (as she rapidly races behind him through a row of Greek columns) to make her way upstairs to his office. She is then shown sneaking past his secretary to join him in his office. Without his knowledge (or “permission”), Elizabeth tells him that she wanted to surprise him and that she has brought him his favorite lunch. She comments on how big his office is and tries to make small talk all while he sits and stares at her from behind his desk. The scene ends when Elizabeth runs out of the office in panic after John refuses to say anything to her other than “what are you doing here?”

This is one of the only times in the film in which she crosses the line into his “public life” where he feels the most vulnerable, and it one of the only scenes in which he is not in the one “in control” of the situation. This scene is therefore important to single out as it is through their countless short exchanges such as their rendezvous on the houseboat and restaurant, their shopping trip, and her unexpected visit to John’s office (among their many sexual encounters) that the film continually attempts to suggest that John’s desire for control comes from his attempts to regain a sense of authority and stability in his life. In this way, John’s character epitomizes film theorist Mark Gallagher’s argument that the principles of “world-weariness, non-
conformity and internalized violence” specifically developed in the male protagonists of film noir “as responses to hegemonic negotiations of idealized masculinity,” which is reflected in the deplorable ways that John treats Elizabeth throughout the film in an attempt to live up to the expectations placed on him as a manifestation of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century American masculine ideals (p. 90).

After considering the lead couple’s interactions throughout the film more carefully, despite seeming somewhat “flat” or “underdeveloped” as a character (as described by Wyatt in his study of the characters in “high concept” films in Chapter 1), it is interesting to note that John’s characterization in 9½ Weeks also reflects Gallagher’s description of male protagonists in film noir in another significant way. As Gallagher argues, the men who commonly populate noirish texts are often “emotionless” figures who appear to be “both sensual and threatening” as well as “simultaneously attractive and repulsive,” which is one way of describing John’s and the paradoxical relationship that Elizabeth (and the viewer) has in relating to and sympathizing with him throughout the film (p. 90).41 Following Elizabeth’s intrusive visit at his office for example, John becomes increasingly distant and “emotionless,” which causes their relationship to become more degrading and grotesque as he continues to push back and challenge Elizabeth’s (sexual and emotional) limits in an attempt to reinstate his power over her through the only real “currency” he has – money (he even goes so far as to make her crawl on the floor towards him as he drops money at his feet in one scene as a twisted form of sexual “role playing”).

41 John’s polished and “flawless” appearance (his smooth skin and bulging muscles are often fetishized in sex sequences throughout the film) also relates to Gallagher argument that “through their personal style, charisma, and controlled sexuality the male characters in film noir are made into objects of male emulation (in terms of spectator response) and female desire (at least the desire of the women characters, if not always that of women viewers),” which further explains his place in the narrative as a complex and contradictory version of the masculine ideal and the embodiment of Elizabeth’s (and potentially the viewers’) sexual fantasies (p. 90).
From the beginning of the film it can be observed that their relationship is built around money and John’s dependence on money as a way of showing Elizabeth affection. For example, when John first speaks to Elizabeth after their (second) chance meeting at the street fair, he surprises her with a $300 “French” shawl that he watches her pick up and decide not to buy. He then surprises her with a watch, roses at work, and lingerie (among other gifts throughout the film), which further suggests that their affair begins and ends with money in a sense and that his only comfortable way of relating to her is through material gifts. It is not until the final scene of the film that John opens up to Elizabeth on an emotional level. In this scene, John finally breaks down and admits that he comes from a large working class family back in a small town outside of Chicago and that he sends some money back to his parents every month to support them now that they are retired. His confession is seemingly one last “futile attempt” to convince her to stay with him as she can be seen as “saving him” from the “everyday anxieties” that come with his “normal” life. In this way, their entire affair/relationship can be seen as John’s attempt to escape the pressures of patriarchy (i.e. a job, marriage, children) to indulge in his more selfish and private (sexual) desires.

Similar to the long line of open-ended noirish texts that came before it, 9½ Weeks also ends somewhat ambiguously. The final sequence includes a short series of shots that alternate between following Elizabeth as she slowly walks down the street and away from John’s apartment to shots of John standing under the archway by the front door as he “passively” waits for her to change her mind and come back to him (Figure 21). The film then leaves it up to the viewer to decide whether or not Elizabeth will forgive him and whether or not John will get the opportunity to continue avoiding (and upending) his patriarchal responsibilities and pressures (by
engaging in his adulterous affair), and regain some security and stability in his masculinity and sense of self.

**Figure 21:** John mumbles under his breath (to himself) as he begs Elizabeth to “come back” to him in the final moments of *9½ Weeks.*

Coming two films after *9½ Weeks*, Lyne’s exploration of a “damaged man” arguably reaches its peak in *Jacob’s Ladder* as Jacob’s life is literally “divided” into various interconnected narrative trajectories, which he passes between through various involuntary “flashbacks” or “dream” sequences over the course of the film (Spicer, p. 47; Abrams, p. 7). Consequently, the filmic events are non-linear and “time” is conflated to present Jacob’s past, present, and future (both the real and imagined) as one continuous string of nightmarish visions and experiences (Abrams, p. 7). However, by charting Jacob’s literal “maze-like” journey through purgatory, as the film progresses it can be observed that his “futile” attempts to make sense of his world relates to the struggles of John in *9½ Weeks*, the men in Lyne’s other films, and the men of other classical film noir and neo-noir texts in that his only goal is to “find himself” and “escape” the “everyday anxieties” of his “life after the war” (Spicer, p. 47; Abrams, p. 7).42

Due to its characteristically noirish and convoluted narrative structure, *Jacob’s Ladder* is somewhat “deliberately confusing” in that the viewer is “lost” along with Jacob as he attempts to put his life back together and make sense of what happened to him when he was “injured” at war

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42 Interestingly, it can be argued that out of all eight of Lyne’s films, *Jacob’s Ladder* most directly relates back to classical film noir texts in that it is based on a veteran’s journey as he struggles to cope with his life after the war as well how he has failed to protect his son and keep his family together, which is similar to the soldiers returning home and adjusting to life in post-World War II America and their “damaged,” anxious, and paranoid on-screen male counterparts.
For example, the film begins with a “flashback” of Jacob in the Vietnam jungle where he is shown laughing and chatting with his platoon (long sweeping tracking shots of helicopters flying low over water at sunset also open the film and set a somewhat peaceful and tranquil tone). The scene quickly takes a drastic turn however, as Jacob’s fellow soldiers all simultaneously begin to suffer from a variety of violent seizures, which seemingly gives away their position to the Vietcong. After a series of shots reveal grenade explosions and heavy gunfire raining down on his camp, Jacob is forced to run off into the jungle alone and he is shown cautiously wandering around through the trees before there is a quick and jerky tracking shot that moves into a close up on Jacob (shot in first person POV from the perspective of an off-screen entity) as he is stabbed in the abdomen with a gun by an off-screen attacker.

This opening sequence is followed by a jump cut to Jacob “waking up” on the subway on his way home from work and he appears to be back in an “uncanny” version New York, as if to suggest that his attack in the jungle was what can be described as merely a repressed memory/flashback or dream. However, there are “subtle hints” throughout this scene on the subway that suggest to the viewer what really happened to Jacob in the war, such as the sign that explicitly says “hell” hanging on the rail of the subway car to the various “horned” and masked “demons” that Jacob runs into as he tries to make his way out of the seemingly abandoned subway station (as illustrated in Figure 17 and in Figure 22).

43 In the chapter entitled “The Crazy Mirror: Noir Stylistics” (first published in his 1981 book The Dark Side of The Screen: Film Noir), the film theorist Foster Hirsch argues that noirish texts often characteristically include narrative structures that are “sinuous, oblique, and deliberately confusing” as they are ultimately designed to “stump the viewer” in their attempts to disentangle the narrative’s “thicket of contradictory clues” to find seemingly “hidden meanings” (p. 72).
Figure 22: The setting of *Jacob’s Ladder* is explicitly stated in the opening scenes of the film - through the juxtaposition of two signs that say “New York” and “HELL” - which can be seen hanging on the walls of his subway car. These signs also reflect the importance of Jacob’s “surroundings” (as discussed in the previous section) as he embarks on his search for clues as to what happened to him during the war.

Consequently, it is established from these opening scenes on that the film is built up of scenes that continuously cut between Jacob in the Vietnam jungle as he lay dying and his journey through “purgatory” or “hell” as he attempts to put the pieces of his “fractured” and “divided” identity back together (Abrams, p. 7).

Not unlike the personal forms of “hell” experienced by John in *9½ Weeks* (and other typical noirish male protagonists), Jacob also suffers from a range of “psychological neuroses” (Spicer, p. 47). For example, in addition to Jacob’s struggle to accept his own death over the course of the film, it is also slowly revealed that he is still grieving over the tragic death of his youngest son Gabe (Macaulay Culken) and the ensuing dissolution of his marriage and family. The significance of Jacob’s relationship with his son is first suggested early in the film when he looks through a bag of photographs and he comes across a picture of Gabe. After pausing to talk to the picture under his breath, there is a quick flash to a “memory” of Jacob hugging and playing with his son, which appears somewhat like a scene from grainy and hand-held home movie, and Jacob’s girlfriend Jezzie (short for “Jezebel” –played by Elizabeth Peña) proceeds to ask him if the boy in the picture is his son who died before the war. In a parallel scene near the end of the film, Jacob looks through a box of photographs and a series of “memories” flash across the scene as it is revealed that Jacob was the one watching his son ride his bike before he wanders into the middle of the road and he is hit by a car as he bends down to pick up a stack of baseball cards. Through these complicated sequences, the narrative slowly weaves together the story of Gabe’s death and what first motivated Jacob to go off to war and the pieces of Jacob’s
fractured psyche slowly become clearer to the viewer when his “fatal flaw” is revealed to be the failure to fulfill his “masculine role” as the protector for his family, his platoon, and “himself” (Gallagher, p. 90; Abrams, p. 7). With the revelation of the various sources of Jacob’s trauma, his journey through “hell” also becomes increasingly more complex over the course of the film.

Taken to more of an extreme than John’s downward spiral in 9½ Weeks, there are several sequences woven into the narrative in which Jacob slips into a seemingly “alternate reality,” in which he believes he is back with his wife and three sons, which further exacerbates his parallel struggles with death and anxiety in relation to the war and the loss of his son. For example, the longest stretch of time that he spends with is family is triggered when Jacob is put into an ice bath by his girlfriend and neighbors to break his “fever” before there is a quick cut to a tracking shot of Jacob “waking up” in bed with his wife to discover that the window has been left open, which also causes him to feel like he is “freezing”. After “waking up,” Jacob’s son Gabe comes into the room, which gives the viewer a first-hand look at how strong of a bond the two of them share as he tucks him back into bed and the two of them sing Al Jolsen’s version of “Sonny Boy” together (which plays again over the closing credits). Following their loving father-son exchange, this sequence ends with Jacob falling back asleep in bed with his wife and there is a cut to a first person POV shot of trees in Vietnam (which is framed from Jacob’s perspective as he is lying on his back on a stretcher and being carried through the jungle by military doctors that can be heard chatting around him) followed by a match cut of Jacob lying on his back in the ice bath back in “New York” (pictured in Figure 23), which is once again intercut with shots of his body on a stretcher being pulled up by a helicopter back in the jungle.
As this sequence of intricately intertwined narrative trajectories demonstrates, Jacob’s goals in the film are equally “divided” between his refusal to let go of the grief and guilt he feels about his son’s death as well as his search for answers about what happened to his platoon during the war (Abrams, p. 7). In other words, at their core, Jacob’s various narrative trajectories work together to encourage the viewer to sympathize and identify with his position in the patriarchal capitalist system and to offer a critique of that system.

In fact, through Jacob’s perilous search for answers, the film more directly relates back to its noirish roots in its blatantly critical attitude towards the government and capitalism as he is constantly (and unknowingly) shown seeking help from the very institutions that led to his death (Benshoff and Griffin, p. 40 and p. 179). In this way, the second half of Jacob’s Ladder unfolds somewhat like a classical film noir “detective story” in which Jacob teams up with the other “surviving” members of his platoon as they attempt to uncover the mystery of who is “following” them and why they are all suffering from similar visions of being pursued by “demons” and “masked/blurred figures” back in “New York” after the war (Abrams, p. 7). Following Jacob’s fever induced hallucinations in the bathtub in which he “remembers” being “evacuated” from the jungle, Jacob and his platoon mates meet up and decide to hire a lawyer (Geary played by Jason Alexander) to investigate what happened to them during the war as they come to believe that “the army did something to them.” In the scenes prior to their consultation with the lawyer, Jacob goes to a bar to meet with a fellow soldier named Paul (Pruitt Taylor Vince) to discuss their “PTSD symptoms” and share stories about the “demons” they believe are
following them. However, upon leaving the bar, Paul is mysteriously “murdered” (his car blows up when he closes the door), which causes Jacob’s fear and panic to escalate and primarily what motivates him to seek out the help of his other platoon members. From this point on, the “plot against” Jacob’s platoon is slowly confirmed in the scenes leading up to the film’s dramatic conclusion.

Signaling the beginning of the film’s dénouement, after Jacob’s final meeting with the lawyer, there is a scene in which he leaves the courthouse and he is forced into the back of a car. While in the car, Jacob is held down by two men in suits and warned about further pursuing his “conspiracy theories” surrounding the government’s involvement with the “incident” in his platoon. The film then takes one final drastic turn as Jacob receives a phone call from Michael (Michael Craven), a self-proclaimed “hippie chemist” who claims that he was arrested before the war (for manufacturing LSD) and forced to work in a lab in Vietnam. Following the phone call, Michael meets with Jacob in the ruins of an abandoned housing structure (which once again “outwardly” reflects Jacob’s “inner” anguish) and he confesses to being part of a top-secret team forced to create a drug called “The Ladder,” which he explains was first tested in Jacob’s battalion and meant to “increase aggressive tendencies” in American soldiers to make them more effective on the battlefield (as a title card at the end of the film states, “The Ladder” is partly based on reports of the real life hallucinogenic drug BZ used in experiments on soldiers during the Vietnam war).

Extending beyond the opening sequence, images of the day they were drugged with “The Ladder” (through the food supply) are intercut with their conversation as Jacob “remembers” seeing his friends charge at each other and shoot each other, which confirms everything that Michael tells him. On the cab ride home from his meeting with Michael, Jacob also experiences
a flashback to the moment he was stabbed and it is revealed to be one of his fellow American soldiers (previously shown off screen in a first person POV shot in the opening sequence) shoving his gun into Jacob’s abdomen. Consequently, through the unveiling of the mystery behind “The Ladder,” it is revealed the primary source of Jacob’s struggles is the very government he was attempting to defend, which leaves the film open to somewhat more subversive readings in that it is openly critical of American patriarchal institutions (the military, industrialism, and capitalism), similar to the long line of noirish texts that came before it (Benshoff and Griffin, p. 40 and p. 179).

In the end, although Jacob is reduced to a “weak, confused, unstable, and ineffectual” state for the majority of the film, he is able to regain some sense of “peace” after his revelatory meeting with Michael (Spicer, p. 47). In one of the more “calming” scenes of the film’s dénouement for example, Jacob also meets with his “chiropractor”/“guardian angel” Louie (Danny Aiello), who tells him that the secret to relieving his pain and suffering is through “letting go.” After taking Louie’s advice, Jacob’s “escape” from his nightmares does eventually come in the form of death, which is showcased in the penultimate scene in the film where he is shown ascending the staircase in his old home, a metaphorical “ladder to heaven,” to be reunited with his son Gabe. In another complex parallel sequence, the final scene of the film shows Jacob’s body in a medical tent in Vietnam, thereby bringing the narrative full circle, and he is pronounced dead by two army doctors who comment that he looks “peaceful” before exiting the tent. Ultimately, like the narrative conclusion of 9½ Weeks before it, the film leaves it to open to the viewer to decide whether or not Jacob was able to regain some sense of identity and control through his journey and if he was finally able to resume the responsibilities of his patriarchal role in the “afterlife” as both a father and an American war “hero” (Spicer, p. 47).
Continuing Lyne’s exploration of “damaged” men, Indecent Proposal follows the male protagonist David as he struggles to put the “divided” pieces of his life back together after the disintegration of his marriage (Spicer, p. 47; Abrams, p. 7). Like Jacob’s Ladder, the film has a non-linear and cyclical structure as the film oscillates between the experiences of both David and Diana as they guide the viewer through the narrative. Because of the nature of this chapter however, the noirish ideological implications of David’s narrative journey will be the focus of my analysis, while Diana is discussed in Chapter 4 as “her half” of the film is more specifically focused on her “sexual” transformation.

Similar to the long line of noir male protagonists that came before him, including Lyne’s other leading male protagonists, David is “dominated by his past” mistakes, which is primarily what causes the narrative to unfold in a “maze-like” way as he communicates his version of events surrounding how and why his wife Diana “left him” to be with the billionaire John Gage (Spicer, p. 49). For example, the opening sequence actually “begins at the end” of their love story and features intercut shots of David and Diana as the couple gives an overview of their relationship history through a split voice-over narration (which is played over the narrative events on and off throughout the film), which is meant to foreshadow the film’s conclusion and establish their “strong bond” for the viewer from the outset. In a series of grainy flashback sequences (like the one’s in Jacob’s Ladder), memories of the couple appear like footage from home videos as they are shown meeting in high school, eloping in Vegas as teens, and their lives as adults struggling to make ends meet. Near the end of this opening sequence however, it is quickly revealed that it is David’s literal inability to provide for his wife and live up to his prescribed patriarchal role as the “breadwinner” that causes the film’s “inciting incident,” which is the couple’s desperate need for money to pay off the bank loan on their “dream home.” From
this point on, the film’s narrative proceeds to play out in “real time” as they travel to Las Vegas in a desperate attempt to win the money.

Once they arrive in Las Vegas, the bond between David and Diana begins to fracture as he is unable to win the money they need. The central conflict of the film then quickly becomes David’s internal struggle with feelings of guilt and paranoia over his failure to live up to his patriarchal responsibilities. For example, akin to the noirish males described by Spicer, David feels “ineffectual” and “emasculated” when they are approached by John Gage with his titular “indecent proposal” of one million dollars for one night with Diana, which thereby gives her the power to acquire the money they need to payoff the bank loan (Spicer, p. 47). Consequently, they switch gender roles in that Diana is able to act as the “provider” while David is reduced to the “inferior” position in their relationship.

Developing as an extension of Jacob’s transformative journey through purgatory (or “hell”) in Jacob’s Ladder, following the sequence in which David spends the night running around the Las Vegas Strip looking for Diana, his “downward spiral” begins to unfold over the second half of the film when the couple returns home to California and they try to “resume” their everyday life together after she is the one who is able keep them afloat financially. Shortly after returning home however, David’s suspicion reaches its breaking point and the tension between them climaxes when he openly confronts Diana about her night away with Gage, which occurs upon the discovery that he has bought the title to their “dream home.” Their “explosive” conversation takes place when Diana is washing dishes one afternoon and it escalates into an argument that ends with the two of them deciding to break up. From this point on, the film follows both David and Diana as they go about their separate lives and try to repair the “damage” they have caused in one another. More specifically, the third act of the film is dedicated to
David’s attempts to “find himself” again through his work and his architecture, which helps him to cope with his “past mistakes” in Vegas. Through David’s search for his “lost identity,” he comes to accept that it was his “failure” to provide for Diana and his inability to prevent her from going off with Gage that caused their relationship to crumble, which he reveals in a lecture about architecture to a group of students at his new job. Furthermore, in the scene in which David confronts her supposed attraction to/feelings for Gage, she explicitly states that it is David’s lack of confidence in himself that finally pushes her to leave him. In this way, David is the epitome of a noir male protagonist in that he “represents an unconventional form of masculinity” – one that is vulnerable, flawed, and fatalistic (Spicer, p. 201).

Interestingly, with the introduction of Gage, the film continually juxtaposes the two leading men and suggests how they each represent vastly different patriarchal ideals and masculine archetypes. While David is representative of a more vulnerable and unconventional masculine ideal as a loving and caring “husband” for a majority of the film, Gage is more like John in 9½ Weeks in that he is representative of the ultimate heteronormative masculine ideal, and as such, he is presented as a ruthless capitalist robber baron of sorts (some promotional posters for the film go so far as to reduce their characters’ to two different archetypes and refer to them simply as “the husband” and “the billionaire,” see Figure 24).

Figure 24: Promotional posters for Indecent Proposal reductively label David (Woody Harrelson) as “The Husband” and Gage (Robert Redford) as “The Billionaire.”
Over the course of the film however, it revealed that neither David nor Gage is fully satisfied with their place in the patriarchal system. For example, in the few scenes in which the viewer is given any expository dialogue from Gage, he communicates a desire for things that money cannot buy, such as the love of a woman like Diana and a “happy marriage” (similar to John’s demonstrative monologue in 9½ Weeks). By posing these two drastically different types of men (a “husband” vs. a “billionaire”) and values against each other (love vs. money), the film raises questions about gender roles and points out the constructed nature of such binary ideals. To take this point further, the juxtaposition of these ideals is visually demonstrated through a scene in which David and Gage play pool in his upscale hotel room, and the camera continuously positions Diana between them in the frame, as they circulate around the table to take their shots and discuss the value of being rich, happy, and married (pictured in Figure 25).

![Figure 25: From the way they speak to their manner of dress, the two leading male protagonists of Indecent Proposal are presented as two contrasting male archetypes that force the viewer to question “what kind” of masculine ideal they prefer/admire (while also exposing how masculinity/male identity cannot be reduced to just one meaning or form of expression).](image)

Ironically, through exposing the similarities between David and Gage, the film also causes an ambiguous identification with and sympathy (or “simultaneous attraction and repulsion”) for both (lead) male characters. Ultimately, it is important to recognize that they are both incomplete and “damaged” men, who are primarily motivated by a desire to find fulfillment in their lives and find a solution to the problems they face, which also “humanizes” them in a way that is characteristically noirish (Spicer, p. 47).

By the end of Indecent Proposal, the viewer is given some form of narrative closure as David and Diana slowly start to make their way back to each other, which occurs after David is
finally able to accept his shortcomings and regain a sense of masculine identity and authority as the loving and domesticated man he was at the beginning of the film. Following David’s “revelation,” the final scene of the film picks up where the opening sequence left off as the couple is “reunited” on the pier where David first proposed to her (after both of them refuse to take the money - thereby eliminating the source of their separation), which brings their narrative journey full circle. While this ending is not necessarily “ambiguous,” the text does leave it open to the viewer to decide what value should be placed on morals and ideals such as love, fidelity, marriage, gender roles, and capitalism/money; and how they each help shape and contribute to the complex and contradictory state of the human condition in contemporary American society and culture.

In conclusion, as the analysis throughout this chapter demonstrates, although the male protagonists in 9½ Weeks, Jacob’s Ladder, and Indecent Proposal occupy slightly different subject positions (i.e. a yuppie, a veteran, a loving husband, and a billionaire), each of them struggles to cope with the pressures of patriarchy, traditional gender roles, and (urban) capitalism in similar ways. As Abrams argues in the conclusion of his chapter, through the exploration of the male characters’ plight, noirish texts often reveal “the inescability of the human condition,” which is another way of describing the ideological effects of Lyne’s films’ focus “masculinity in crises,” or “hell,” as this chapter has attempted to demonstrate (Abrams, p. 22). Although this chapter chose to only focus on three of Lyne’s films to demonstrate his signature way of hegemonically negotiating with norms around gender and class, the observations made throughout this chapter can be adapted and applied to his other films in future studies.

44 Interestingly, Abrams’ theories about the underlying connective thread of “inescability” in film noir echoes Robin Wood’s theories about repression in the horror film as he also argues that “basic repression is universal, necessary, and inescapable” (p. 63).
Conclusion

Similar to Abrams and Spicers’ work on neo-noir, Sylvia Harvey’s musings on gender construction in film noir (“Woman’s Place: The Absent Family in Film Noir,” 1980) can also be used to describe Lyne’s films’ attempt to question and challenge norms around gender – in a particularly noirish way. For example, Harvey argues that texts associated with (or labeled as) film noir often attempt to “expose the fault line cracks” that started to appear along gender issues and the conception of the family in the domestic sphere as well as the work force in post-World War II America (Duckworth quoting Harvey, p. 23). 45 Furthermore, Harvey suggests that film noir characteristically represents the family and the domestic sphere in a fragmented state in an attempt to “mirror an underlying sense of decay and complication in the validity of traditional gender roles” (Duckworth quoting Harvey, p. 23). 46 Consequently, Harvey’s observations about classical film noir texts relates to this chapter’s (and this thesis’) overarching argument that Lyne’s films also characteristically attempt to “create discussion” by “exposing the fault line cracks” around changes concerning gender roles and expectations, patriarchy, and urban capitalism (existent in the 1980s through to today in American life and culture).

45 Similar to Harvey, the film scholars Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin describe the classical Hollywood film noir texts in the 1940s and 1950s as “expressing the social and political tensions between men and women in the postwar period, tensions that had been created by women’s wartime independence versus the postwar patriarchy’s need to make them once again subservient to men” (Benshoff and Griffin, p. 40).

46 Along with Lyne’s films, countless other texts emerged in the 1980s and 1990s that critically comment on and address issues around gender and capitalism as a response to the radical changes in cultural attitudes. Examples include Wall Street (1987), Fight Club (1999), and American Psycho (2000). Similar to Lyne’s films, each of these texts explores white male anxiety and paranoia experienced by characters living in diegetic worlds that mirror the tensions and frustrations of the contemporaneous yuppie subculture. These issues are more specifically explored in Chapter 4 in relation to Lyne’s depiction of transgressive sexuality in conjunction with a discussion of Barry Keith Grant’s work “Rich and Strange: The Yuppie Horror Film” (1996).
Ironically, what often “comes up through” the “exposed cracks” is the “return of repressed” urges (both sexual and violent in nature), which is examined further in the next chapter in relation to Lyne’s films.
CHAPTER 4

“NO ORDINARY LOVE”: CHALLENGING HETERONORMATIVITY THROUGH
“TRANSGRESSIVE” SEX AND SEXUALITY

Figure 26: The focus on sex/sexuality is one of the most common elements present across Lyne’s oeuvre. From Foxes to Unfaithful, there are countless “(sex)ually charged” scenes that add to the controversial and complex nature of his work. One such unique and iconic sex scene is in Indecent Proposal in which the lead protagonists Diana and David make love on a bed covered in money.

Echoing Sade’s soft and languid R&B love ballad “No Ordinary Love,” which plays non-diegetically on the soundtrack during an early sex scene in Indecent Proposal, the sex and sexuality in Lyne’s films is characteristically taboo and unconventional, or more specifically, non-heteronormative and “transgressive” (pictured in Figure 26). As outlined in Chapter 1, some form of “transgressive” sexuality is present across Lyne’s entire body of work including his commercials, short films, and feature films. The connection between Lyne’s films and sex and/or sexuality are so deeply embedded that it would be difficult not to examine these aspects in some way or another in conducting a comprehensive study of his work.

To aid in my analysis of transgressive sex and/or sexuality in Lyne’s films, this chapter primarily draws on Tanya Krzywinska’s book Sex and the Cinema (2006) and her theories surrounding the ideological function of heterosexual forms of transgressive sex and sexuality present within a multitude of films from Hollywood and around the world. The films she discusses range from the early days of cinema in the 1890s (such as The Kiss in 1896, directed by William Helse and distributed by Thomas Edison) through the mid-2000s (including brief analyses of several of Lyne’s films, which are engaged with and expanded on throughout this chapter). Similar to the discussion of their marketing images in Chapter 1, this chapter primarily
focuses on closely analyzing 9½ Weeks, Fatal Attraction, Indecent Proposal, and Unfaithful as they more predominantly display the signature way that Lyne’s films attempt to challenge heteronormativity (and traditional gender roles) through various forms of “transgressive” sex and sexuality. Transgressive sex and sexuality is arguably one of the strongest connective threads present across Lyne’s oeuvre and the third and final “signature” element to be discussed in analyzing his films within this study.

As Krzywinska states, “the term transgression comes from the Latin words trans (across) and gradi (to walk)” and “appears to have been in common use in both France and Britain during the Medieval period in the context of breaking a command or law” (p. 111). Drawing on these origins, Krzywinska more specifically defines sexual “transgression” in cinema as “an expressive act that in some respect contradicts or inverts codes and norms,” which relates to this chapter’s argument that Lyne’s films continually attempt to challenge, or “walk across,” established heteronormative representations of sex and sexuality. To extend her book’s overarching theorization regarding transgressive sexuality’s subversive function in cinema, Krzywinska argues that the depiction of “sexual transgression in film is potentially a means to challenge the status quo” (p. 115). However, Krzywinska also concedes that,

while it is open to question whether cinematic representations of sex offer any sustained political challenge to dominant norms, it is evident that transgressive images and identities in cinema do sometimes offer alternatives to the norm, and at times, demonstrate the conditions and vested interests on which sexual ideologies and rhetorics operate. (p. 115)

Therefore, keeping this somewhat unstable, “open,” and contradictory nature of filmic representations of transgressive sex/sexuality in mind, this chapter seeks to argue that Lyne’s

47 In an English-speaking context, the term “transgression” also often has “strong biblical resonance” and negative connotations attached to it (Krzywinska, p. 111). As Krzywinska notes, “while the term itself does not appear in the Book of Genesis, prohibition, transgression and punishment are absolutely core to its message, as is also the case with the rest of the Old Testament” (p. 111).
films can also be read as having “the potential” to “create discussion” by “offering alternatives”
to heteronormative representations present within other mainstream American films, even if they
do not necessarily completely overturn “the status quo” and “dominant norms” through such
depictions (Krzywinska, p. 115).

It’s All About Sex: Sexually Transgressive “Narrative Formulas” in Lyne’s Films

As Krzywinska states, it is important to observe “the role that the narrative plays in
shaping the meaning of sex and sexuality” in cinematic texts as it “provides a context that affects
character function and action,” which is why the specific narrative patterns that can be identified
in Lyne’s films are also useful to consider when observing the variety of interconnected
“transgressive” representations of non-heteronormative sex/sexuality present across his oeuvre.

Included in the “Forms and Frameworks of Transgression” section (in Part I) of her book,
Krzywinska dedicates an entire chapter entitled “Narrative Formulas” to what she describes as
mapping out “some of the chief types of narrative formations that frequently appear in films that
are concerned with sex and/or sexual desire” (p. 49). Within this chapter, two of the primary
“narrative formulas” that she identifies and explores are (1) “sexual initiation and self-discovery”
and (2) “return of the repressed,” which are both present in each of Lyne’s films to some extent
(p. 62 and p. 69). The following sections apply Krzywinska’s observations about these two
narrative formulas in the analysis of Lyne’s films as a way of demonstrating how one of the
strongest connective and “signature” threads between them is the challenging of dominant
ideology and heteronormativity through the representation of various forms of transgressive sex
and sexuality. Several other theorists’ work, such as Linda Ruth Williams and Barry Keith Grant,
will also be introduced to further inform and support the connections that I am attempting to make between Lyne’s films.

The “Sexual Initiation and Self-Discovery” Narrative Formula

Comparable to Chapter 2’s discussion of *Foxes*, *Flashdance*, and *Lolita*, in relation to Lyne’s “brand” of melodrama (or “women’s films”), as they each prioritize the female characters’ desires and active agency, Krzywinska describes the “sexual initiation and self-discovery” narrative formula as one that “facilitates the depiction of women as sexual subjects rather than simply objects of desire” (p. 62). According to Krzywinska, the “sexual initiation and self-discovery” narrative formula was first exhibited in European cinema in the 1920s and 1930s in films such as the Czech director Gustav Machatý’s *Erotika* (*Erotikon*, 1929) and *Ecstasy* (*Extase*, 1932) and the German director Leontine Sagan’s *Girls in Uniform* (*Mädchen in Uniform*, 1931). However, as Krzywinska notes, the narrative formula did not enter mainstream cinema until 1960s and 1970s, with the emergence of a small group of low budget “soft-core sex” films from France and Italy, such as the French director Just Jaeckin’s *Emmanuelle* (1974) and *The Story of O* (1975), *Bilitis* (1977, directed by David Hamilton), and Marquis de Sade’s *Justine* (1977, directed by Jess Franco), which all focus on “women who embark on journeys of sexual self-discovery” (p. 62 and p. 63). Although these films were not made by Hollywood studios, they all saw commercial success due to what Krzywinska describes as their “‘pretty’ art cinema aesthetic” and “the theme of sexual self-discovery,” which led to their prominent influence on mainstream directors in Hollywood, such as Lyne in terms of style and subject matter, in the following decades.48

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48 As Krzywinska explains, the “sexual initiation and self-discovery” narrative films of the 1960s’s and 1970s shared various stylistic traits (which made up their “pretty art cinema aesthetic”) such as “lush art-cinema-style
Through her discussion of the narrative formula’s historical evolution and a brief analysis of its early examples, Krzywinska also suggests that “sexual initiation and self-discovery” narratives tend to focus on “the sexual body” and “cut across genres,” including comedy and melodrama, which also relates her theories back to my discussion of Lyne’s films in Chapter 2 and how they can be understood as examples of “women’s films” in many ways (p. 62). For example, Krzywinska argues that there is a direct link between melodrama and/or “women’s films” and the “sexual initiation and self-discovery” narrative formula as they are all “structured around the experience of a female protagonist” and “invoke issues about the meanings of gender and sexual identity and the subjective effects of transformation and emotional change” (p. 64). Moreover, Krzywinska links the “sexual initiation and self-discovery” narrative formula directly back to melodrama’s more traditional narrative traits in stating that there is often “much soul-searching, conflicting emotions tears [or weeping] and joy” (p. 64). Along with Lyne’s 9½ Weeks, Krzywinska singles out Romance (1999, Catherine Breillat) and Virgin (2003, Deborah Kampmeier) as some of the most recent examples of how the “sexual initiation and self discovery” narrative formula can be found in films that “hybridize” elements of melodrama (along with other genres) to explore issues of “gender, identity, power and pleasure” in today’s international cinema culture (p. 63 and p. 69).

Krzywinska builds on Linda Ruth Williams book The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema (2005), in which Williams also suggests that contemporary melodramas often focus on a combination of female subjectivity and sexuality, and she goes so far as to propose a very distinct form of melodrama, what she refers to as “sexual melodrama,” a recently developed sub-

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photography and mise-en-scène; soft-focus lenses, carefully staged sets, dreamy music and glamorous locations” that “each contribute to what she describes as “the melodious aura of idyllic fantasy” - which are similar to the elements discussed in relation to “Lyne’s look” and his reputation as a “master of surfaces,” in Chapter 1 (p. 63).
genre of the erotic thriller (p. 390). Similar to Krzywinska’s description of “sexual initiation and sexual-discovery” narratives, Williams describes “the sexual melodrama” as focusing on a combination “sex” and “women’s concerns” (p. 390). Like the classical melodramas or “women’s films of the 1940s,” Williams argues that “sexual melodramas” also emphasize “female suffering and familial relationships, the dichotomy between bondage and freedom, domesticity and choice, and the undermining or reinforcement of stereotypes” (p. 390). However, to distinguish between the classical and contemporary period, Williams goes on to argue that contemporary “sexual melodramas,” which she describes as “erotically charged female sexual quests,” can also be read as having “replaced suffering with desire” and as “overlapping with romance in its focus on the dangerous enticements of unknown sexual pleasures” (p. 390).

Williams specifically identifies and refers to Lyne as a “primary director of contemporary Hollywood women’s films,” or “sexual melodramas” (p. 391). Interestingly, Williams also cites the following films as examples of contemporary “sexual melodramas”; *Zandalee* (dir. Sam Pillsbury, 1991) *Poison Ivy* (dir. Katt Shea, 1992) and several films directed by Zalman King (who also co-wrote Lyne’s *9½ Weeks*) including *Two Moon Junction* (1988), *Wild Orchid* (1989), and *Red Shoe Diaries* (1992). However, in relation to discussing Lyne’s films as representatives of “sexual melodrama,” Williams singles out *9½ Weeks, Indecent Proposal,* and *Unfaithful* and argues that they are centered on “will she/won’t she female sexual quest tales” that are “consistent in their foregrounding of the heroine’s point of view” (p. 391). I now briefly draw on and expand upon Williams and Krzywinska’s observations about *9½ Weeks* and *Unfaithful,* with attention to their (“signature” and) “transgressive” foregrounding of female sexual concerns/desires and agency.
Similar to the narrative structure of *Foxes, Flashdance*, and *Lolita* (later in Lyne’s career) – which follow the teenage female protagonists as they attempt to deal with issues with their parents, careers, dating and sex – *9½ Weeks* evolves beyond Lyne’s first two films to focus on an adult female protagonist, Elizabeth, as she attempts to sexually “re-discover” herself and learn to enjoy life again after a bitter divorce. As described by Williams, the film begins with various intercut shots of Elizabeth walking toward the camera (pictured in Figure 27), through the crowded city streets of New York, and ends with her walking away from the camera as she turns to enter the art gallery where she works as a curator (p. 391). As Williams suggests, from the opening sequence on, the film positions Elizabeth as the dominant figure and active agent in the film, as it is her “movements” that come to drive the narrative action (which is also the case with *Foxes, Flashdance*, and *Lolita* – as discussed in Chapter 2).

![Figure 27](image)

*Figure 27:* One of the first shots of Elizabeth in the opening sequence of *9½ Weeks*. In an almost identical way to how Alex first appears on-screen in *Flashdance*, Elizabeth is shot from a low angle and positioned in the center of the frame as she walks toward the camera. The viewer is introduced to her here and stays with her for the remainder of the film. The upbeat and optimistic urban pop song “The Best Is Yet To Come” by Luba can be heard playing non-diegetically on the soundtrack throughout the sequence, foreshadowing the narrative events to come.

After a brief introduction to the characters, the narrative of *9½ Weeks* primarily focuses on following Elizabeth and John on their sexual escapades (discussed in Chapter 2), as he introduces her to a range of new sexual activities including exhibitionism and role-playing. However, the film also constantly attempts to connect the couple’s sexual episodes/vignettes, or what Williams describes as the “Happy Interlude” in their relationship, by interweaving moments in which Elizabeth attempts to articulate how she is changing and growing through the relationship (p. 391). As summarized by Williams, the structure of the film moves Elizabeth “from the position of a confused divorcée to that of a woman in control of her choices” (p. 392). Acting as somewhat of a parallel to the opening sequence, the changes in Elizabeth’s character
are epitomized in the final scene of the film in which she definitively tells John “No” (for the first time in their relationship) as he begs her to stay with him (after an incident in which he pushes her sexual limits “too far” by hiring a prostitute to sleep with them). The film/the titular 9½ week affair ends when Elizabeth chooses to leave John after she realizes how destructive her relationship with him has become, and the film lingers on an open-ended series of shots, which once again follow Elizabeth through the streets as she makes her way farther and farther from John’s apartment, to suggest that she has the final action/choice in the film and that perhaps she will continue on her journey of “sexual initiation and self-discovery” on her own.

Jumping ahead to Lyne’s final film, Constance’s journey in *Unfaithful* is also centered on her sexual satisfaction and her attempts to regain some sense of personal pleasure and fulfillment in her life. For example, Constance is shown going from a bored housewife in the beginning of the film, to indulging in various carefree romantic trysts with Paul (her younger and more adventurous lover – played by Olivier Martinez) in several “exotic” locales around town (including a bathroom stall in a local coffee shop), to eventually choosing to break up with him. Somewhat different to Elizabeth’s post-divorce affair with John in *9½ Weeks* however, “Constance’s affair with Paul is a form of purely sexual fulfillment that has been missing from her marriage to Ed (Richard Gere),” which once again shows how Lyne attempts to present issues surrounding female sexual desire and agency (Williams, p. 391). To highlight how her affair changes her, similar to the moments in which Elizabeth openly begins to stand up to and express herself to John (and the viewer) in *9½ Weeks*, there is a scene in *Unfaithful* in which Constance gets ready to meet with Paul and she is shown indulging in her newfound confidence as she slowly puts on her new lingerie, new shoes, and a new dress (*Figure 28*) – which also
reinforces how the film is primarily about her “sexual revitalization” (or “re-discovery”) and fulfillment.

Diana’s character arc and transformation in *Indecent Proposal* (which Williams does mention – but does not analyze) can also be described in terms of the “sexual initiation and self-discovery” narrative formula as well as being representative of the “sexual melodrama” sub-genre in that she must learn how to rebuild her self-assurance and security in her marriage over the course of the narrative. After the leading protagonists travel to Las Vegas for example, Diana’s marriage begins to disintegrate, and the second act of the film is centered on a period of time (or a “Happy Interlude”) in which she allows herself to explore a relationship with the billionaire John Gage (he showers her with expensive gifts and dates – such as the designer dress he sees her admiring in **Figure 28**) while she tries to learn how to forgive her husband (and herself) for agreeing to their million-dollar “transgressive” arrangement with him (p. 391).

**Figure 28:** Although Krzywinska and Williams do not discuss them in explicit detail, all of Lyne’s films consistently foreground moments in which the female protagonists are allowed to indulge in their sexual and/ or physical (and often material) pleasures and desires. For example, these two images are very similar in showcasing intimate moments in which Constance in *Unfaithful* and Diana in *Indecent Proposal* are trying on new outfits and taking the time to be alone to admire their bodies and femininity/sexuality.

Consequently, the film ends much like *9½ Weeks* (and Lyne’s other films) in that Diana chooses to go back to her husband, after she ultimately “re-discovers” her love for their “simple” (middle class) life together (which only occurs once she regains her sense of femininity/sensuality through her time with Gage), thereby giving *her* the final action in the film. Considering that the film is also split equally between the narration of both David and Diana however, it can be
argued that the film highlights both of their perspectives, but Diana’s story more pervasively emphasizes her chance to grow sexually and feel empowered through sex (as she is the one who is given the opportunity to experience extra-marital relations), which also relates the text specifically back to other predominantly female-centered films.

Interestingly, while neither Krzywinska nor Williams discuss (or even mention) Lyne’s other films, it is important to point out that elements of the “sexual initiation and self-discovery” narrative formula and “sexual melodrama” can be found within each of them (as already discussed in relation to the narrative journeys of the teenage female protagonists in Foxes, Flashdance and Lolita in Chapter 2). For example, Alex Forest in Fatal Attraction is presented as a women who actively (and aggressively) pursues her married lover Dan over the course of the film (Figure 29 shows Alex and Dan seconds after she pulls him into the elevator and performs oral sex on him). One could argue that Jezebel’s (whose character’s name comes from the biblical figure who has become the archetype of a “a morally and sexually unrestrained woman” in western/Christianized cultures – according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary definition) narrative in Jacob’s Ladder also allows for the articulation of female driven sexual desire and exploration. Throughout the film, she continually pushes Jacob to let go of his past and indulge in their new (love) life together after the war. There are countless scenes in which she dresses up in front of Jacob and entices him to have sex with her, such as when she gets into the shower with him and tries to help him forget about all of his “demons” and distressing “visions” (Figure 29), which immediately follows the daunting opening scene on the subway.
Figure 29: (From left to right these images are from Fatal Attraction, Jacob’s Ladder, and Flashdance) Lyne’s films consistently present his leading female protagonists as sexually aggressive and “desiring beings” that actively pursue their “sexual appetites,” without shame or hesitation.

Through his continual focus on female sexual desire and agency, Lyne’s films can be read as ultimately attempting to explore sex as a vital and challenging part of life that should not be repressed or contained and that is essential to the human experience, for the female protagonists in particular (Krzywinska, pp. 68-69). While these connections may seem tenuous (or forced and excessive), they are important to acknowledge in that ALL of Lyne’s films, from Foxes to Unfaithful, attempt to push (or “walk across”) the boundaries (as Figure 29 demonstrates) and contribute to a significant shift in traditional renditions of female desire in mainstream films.

The “Return of the Repressed” Narrative Formula

Similar to her discussion of the “sexual initiation and self-discovery” narrative formula as a form that attempts to create a space for the open (and transgressive) expression of female desire and sexuality, the “return of the repressed” is described by Krzywinska as a narrative formula that “expresses the effects of psychological and/or social constraints on sexual desire – and its gendered forms – in often sensationalist ways and to create maximum dramatic tension” (p. 69). As she further explains, “the underlying premise of this narrative form relates to a more general theoretical view, derived mainly from psychoanalysis, that to become a properly functioning member of the social order individuals must suppress certain fears, desires, fantasies or behaviors that would be disruptive to that social order” (p. 70). As an example of the “return of the repressed” narrative formula, Krzywinska briefly discusses and compares Robert Mamoulian’s 1931 version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Mary Reilly (1996 – a more recent
version of the Stevenson tale directed by Stephen Frears), as they both “frame their narrative in
terms of psychoanalytic understandings of the return of the repressed in which the effects of
sexual repression and oppression are central” (p. 73).49

Like the films that utilize the “sexual initiation and self-discovery” narrative formula,
Krzywinska points out that the return of the repressed narrative formula has a presence “across a
number of genres” (i.e. melodrama, comedy, and non-genre films), but she also points out that its
“most visceral and overt articulation” is found in the horror genre (p. 71). In acknowledgement
of the long-standing relationship between repression and the horror genre in film theory and
criticism, Krzywinska builds on quite a number of film academics, including Robin Wood,
Barbara Creed, and Carol J. Clover, as they have all focused on what she describes as “the way
‘the return of the repressed’ operates within in the horror genre to provide an overt or implicit
critique of the status quo” (p. 71). While I do not necessarily mean to imply that Lyne’s films
are “horror films” per se, exploring how they employ the “return of repressed” narrative formula
is useful to consider in opening them up to new and subversive readings.

Although he does not explicitly reference Krzywinska’s narrative formula, Barry Keith
Grant’s chapter “Rich and Strange: Economic Performance Anxiety and the Yuppie Horror
Film” (in his book Shadows of Doubt: Negotiations of Masculinity in American Genre films,
2010) also discusses how the “return of the repressed” functions to subvert/destabilize cultural
norms around gender and sexuality within a very specific group of horror films. According to
Grant, several mainstream American films of the late 1980s to the early 2000s, including Fatal
Attraction, forms what he argues is a postmodern “cycle or “subgenre” that “draws on

49 As a predecessor to the filmic form of the narrative formula, Krzywinska also cites Matthew Lewis’ gothic novel
The Monk (1796), as one of the earliest appearances of the “return of the repressed” in literary form (p. 72).
conventions of the classical horror genre to address the fears and anxieties of the contemporaneous yuppie subculture,” which he refers to as the “yuppie horror film” (p. 156). In addition to Fatal Attraction, Grant cites several other examples of the yuppie horror film cycle including After Hours (1985), Wall Street (1987), Bad Influence (1990), Pacific Heights (1990), Cape Fear (1991), The Hand That Rocks The Cradle (1992), Poison Ivy (1992), Single White Female (1992), The Temp (1993), Sliver (1993), Falling Down (1993), and Disclosure (1994). Grant argues that the yuppie horror film “retains much of the style and syntax of the horror genre” but also substitutes some of its “semantic elements” in that it “tilts” and “transforms the ‘evil’ of classical horror films from the otherworldly and supernatural to the material and economic pressures of the time” (p. 156).50

Grant also argues that the yuppie horror film “expresses the contradictions and repressions of bourgeois society” by “specifically addressing the anxieties of an affluent culture in an era of prolonged recession and the consequent perceived threats, especially to masculinity, incited by changing gender relations” (p. 156). In her own terminology, Krzywinska argues that “The return of the repressed -- is subversive because it articulates the tensions and struggles that are engendered by a particular hegemonic order,” such as the yuppie subculture/patriarchal capitalism’s repressive role in the films discussed by Grant (pp. 80-81). By combining these two theorists’ observations, Lyne’s films can also be understood as attempting to critically address issues around masculinity, patriarchy, capitalism, and changing gender relations. While these aspects have already been analyzed in relation to several films across his oeuvre in the previous chapter, I now briefly analyze them in Fatal Attraction and Unfaithful, with specific attention to

50 Grant also cites several precursors to the “yuppie horror film,” such as Rosemary’s Baby (1968), Race with the Devil (1975) and various films directed by Alfred Hitchcock, including Strangers On A Train (1951), Vertigo (1958), and Psycho (1960), which also feature narratives focused on masculine anxiety and the questioning of patriarchy (pp. 155-172).
how his characters use sex as a way of coping with their everyday anxieties to work through their repressed sexual (and violent) desires and urges.

As the name of Grant’s sub-genre implies, the main character type present in the “yuppie horror film” is the yuppie. According to Grant, the term “yuppie” is an acronym that was coined in 1983 to describe “an emergent and distinct social class of young urban professionals” who “combined the ‘me generation’ of the Carter era with Reaganomics to become an icon of the era’s zeitgeist” (p. 156). Grant also cites the definition of a yuppie offered by The Yuppie Handbook (written by Marissa Piesman and Marilee Hartley and originally published in 1984) as a term that applies to anyone who meets the following criteria: (1) resides in or near one of the major cities; (2) claims to be between the ages of 25 and 45; and 3) lives on aspirations of glory, prestige, recognition, fame, social status, power, money, or any and all combinations of the above (p. 156). In summation of these definitions, Grant proposes that these character traits and values “coalesced into a [yuppie’s] lifestyle,” which is explored and critiqued within the yuppie horror film (p. 157).

Although I have already addressed how Lyne’s films commonly follow narratives about Eurocentric male characters that are constantly attempting to negotiate with everyday anxieties and patriarchal pressures, I have yet to use the word “yuppie” to describe the subject position that his male characters have a tendency to occupy. However, the male characters across Lyne’s oeuvre (i.e. John in 9½ Weeks, Jacob in Jacob’s Ladder, and David in Indecent Proposal – as discussed in chapter 3) do fit Grant’s description of what a yuppie is and they function in a similarly subversive way within his films. For example, in several sections of his article, Grant specifically discusses and analyzes the character of Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas) and Fatal Attraction as the epitome of a yuppie and the yuppie horror film (p. 160). Interestingly, Grant
begins his discussion of the film by acknowledging the text’s history of being “uniformly criticized for scapegoating the professional female” (p. 162). As such, his reading of the film starts off more reactionary then becomes slowly more progressive and subversive, thereby attempting to showcase the ambivalent and contradictory ideological implications of the film and the yuppie horror sub-genre as a whole, rather than reductively suggesting that the film is simply one or the other (which is in direct contrast to Faludi’s reading of the film as noted in Chapter 1). Echoing Grant in this regard, Krzywinska also argues that “return of the repressed” narratives are often “morally ambiguous” and do not lend themselves to merely “reactionary” or “progressive” readings, which is also how Fatal Attraction can be described (along with Lyne’s other films - as I have attempted to argue throughout the previous chapters).

Grant’s starts his more reactionary reading of the film in the section of his chapter entitled “Monstrous Other and Material Fears” in which he explains that an essential element of the horror genre is the presence of “a monster,” and that in the yuppie horror film, “the villains are commonly coded as monsters” (p. 160). To showcase this point, Grant identifies Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) as the “monster” in Fatal Attraction and goes on to say that the film can be read as “the horrifying mind-screen and psychodrama of Dan,” wherein the result of his affair with Alex can be seen as “the return of the repressed dissatisfaction with his marriage” (p. 162). Grant describes Dan as “feeling trapped by his domesticity, his discontent imaged forth in the family’s cramped apartment,” which is displayed in the opening scene of the film. In this scene, Dan’s wife Beth (Anne Archer) is shown haphazardly getting ready in the bathroom (with her laundry visibly hang drying on the shower curtain rod) while Dan is shown wearing ear phones to block out the sound of his daughter watching television as he attempts to get some work done before they have to leave for his company party (p. 162).
Beyond this opening sequence, Dan’s “dissatisfaction” is also exemplified early on in the film in the scene following the party in which he returns from walking the dog to find his daughter Ellen (Ellen Latzen) in bed with his wife, leaving no room for him. This moment is what Grant then argues ultimately “leads him to fantasize about a relationship with Alex” (who he first meets at his company party in the previous scene). As Grant also takes the time to point out in this section, Dan only pursues his affair with Alex when his wife and daughter ironically leave town for the weekend to visit her parents in the country to look for a house in suburbia, where he will be made to feel even more secluded and trapped by his domesticity (Grant, p. 162).

Following their return home however, Grant argues that the narrative shifts in tone and focus as Dan assuages his guilt by displacing it onto Alex, and he goes so far as to call her “sick” in one scene thereby making her “the monstrous other” from that point on in film in that she does not abide by what he refers to as “the rules” (Grant, p. 163).

Along with suggesting that Alex is a manifestation of Dan’s “repressed urges” and the “monstrous other,” she can also be understood in the way that Krzywinska describes the “monster” in “return of the repressed narratives” as “a threat to ‘civilization’ in an overtly or implicitly sexualized way,” which she explains is the function of the leading female protagonists in films such as The Exorcist (1973) and Carrie (1976) (p. 71 and p. 79). Citing Barbara Creed and Carol Clover, Krzywinska argues that “it may be the case that the revolting, unfettered, and monstrous female body can be a source of retributive enjoyment for some women viewers (even if that threat is eventually stalked, contained or reburied by the end of the film)” in “return of the repressed” narratives, which is one way of describing how Alex is characterized in Fatal Attraction (p. 79). In addition to referring to Alex as the “monster” in the film, moving to a somewhat more subversive and progressive reading of the film, Grant also recognizes that “in
her refusal to be reasonable,” or “to be ignored” and “treated like the sides of beef hanging outside her apartment”, and that as a result, she can also be read as “refusing to allow the removal of her voice” (p. 163). To support this point, there are several textual examples of Alex’s literal refusal “to give up her voice,” such as the incessant telephone calls and messages she leaves for Dan and the cassette tape she leaves in his car, which are all “instances of an assertive female voice that seem beyond masculine control. Throughout the film then, it is not Alex but Dan who is silenced or ignored, as her adamant refusal to have an abortion leaves him, as he admits, with “no say.”

By giving Alex a sense of power over Dan, the film can ultimately be read as avoiding portraying her as simply a “monster” or as an “easily dismissible incarnation of metaphysical ‘evil’” in that the audience is encouraged to identify and sympathize with her situation. In the scene in which Alex confronts Dan about being pregnant for example, she is given a defining and humanizing moment in which she is portrayed as more than just a menacing threat to masculinity and patriarchy. Furthermore, as Krzywinska remarks in her chapter, “the introduction of romantic pathos and psychological complexity into the return of the repressed narrative may prompt viewers to reflect on the ways that they too have experienced sexual desires as contradictory to identity, confusing, or alien and dangerous,” which is how one could see Alex’s relentless pursuit of Dan and the overarching purpose of their relationship in the film (p. 77).

Grant continues a more “progressive” and subversive reading of the film (in the section of his chapter entitled “Ideology in Yuppie Horror”) in arguing that Fatal Attraction (among various other yuppie horror films) cannot be read as “endorsing the ideological status quo” due to its “insistent questioning of patriarchal assumptions” (and the yuppie horror film’s central
concern with “expressing an unease about capitalist ideology”) - which is similar to Krzywinska’s argument (as she quotes Barbara Creed) that “the return of the repressed narratives of the horror film often ‘provide us with a means of understanding the dark side of the patriarchal unconscious’” (p. 166 and p. 79). To highlight the film’s ironic undertones, Grant analyzes the final sequence and the final image (Figure 30) in the following way,

It is Beth who kills Alex, after which she and Dan embrace, reunited because she has submitted to the patriarchal imaginary; only then can the marriage be ‘happy’. The final shot is thus heavy with Sirkian irony, worthy of the famous ending of All That Heaven Allows (1955): the camera pans to the fireplace mantle, the hearth of the family home, showing a photograph of the married couple…a still image and a pair of bronzed baby shoes. Both objects undercut the notion that anything has changed in Dan and Beth’s relationship; rather, the objects connote immobility and stasis and are a comment on their embrace of traditional values. (pp. 167-168)

Along with recognizing the subversive potential of the final image, Grant’s description of the film ultimately being about “masculine fears” and “masculine panic” can also be applied to Lyne’s other films (p. 166).

Figure 30: The final shot of Fatal Attraction is a photograph of the “happy family” by a pair of bronzed baby boots, which are both subversively symbolic of the “immobility” and “stasis” of Dan and Beth’s relationship - even after the (displaced) threat to their marriage (the “monstrous other” Alex) has been eliminated.

In Unfaithful, Ed Sumner is also an archetypal “yuppie” who is at the mercy of his repressed feelings and desires. Although the first half of the narrative is focused on his wife Constance’s extra-marital affair, Ed is woven into the narrative from the opening scenes onward and he plays an integral part in how their marriage begins to unravel. From the opening sequence

51 According to Grant (and my own research), the only other publication that has attempted to acknowledge the subversive potential of the film is the aptly named article “In Defense of Fatal Attraction” written by N.A. Morris (Cited in Grant’s “Notes to Chapter 9” in his book Shadows of Doubt: Negotiations of Masculinity in the American Genre Film, pp. 212-213).
of the film (similar to the opening of *Fatal Attraction*), there are subtle hints that their marriage and “nuclear” All-American family is not as “perfect” (or as enviable) as it seems. The first time the viewer sees Ed, he is rushing off to work one morning (and berating his wife about not investing in stocks when he first suggested it), which is the first indication that there is no warmth or romance left in their relationship. From this point on, whenever the viewer sees Ed, he seems to be more focused on his work than paying attention to his wife, which partly explains her attraction to Paul’s carefree and reckless attitude towards life (and work as he is a free-lance book dealer). In one intimate exchange for example, Ed tries to be somewhat playful by taping his wife with his new video camera, but she is unresponsive, as she has already begun her affair with Paul. Ironically, it is also soon revealed that Ed is the CEO of a “security” company that supplies and deploys armored vehicles, which is a revelation that is rife with irony in that his job makes it impossible for him to be both a breadwinner for his family as well as give them the moral and emotional support (or “security”) that they desperately seem to be missing.

![Figure 31](image)

*Figure 31:* (From left to right is Dan in *Fatal Attraction*, Ed in *Unfaithful* and Humbert in *Lolita*) The male characters in Lyne’s films are often presented as anxious and “repressed” in their love lives and marriages. As a result, many of his films showcase narratives in which “masculine fears” and “panic” are acted out through various transgressive (both sexual and violent) acts, which relates his films directly back to both the “return of the repressed” narrative formula discussed by Krzywinska and the “yuppie horror film” cycle discussed by Grant.

Although he eventually hires a private detective to follow his wife in order to discover why she has become so distant and distracted, Ed never gains the confidence to confront his wife about her infidelity. Instead, he displaces his anger onto Paul and brutally acts out his
“repressed” sexual frustration on his wife’s lover (similar to Humbert’s murderous and cathartic pursuit of Lolita’s lover Quilty, after discovering that he is the one who stole her away from him - as discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2). In the scene following Constance’s final encounter with Paul, Ed kills him in a fit of rage (unaware that she planned to break off the affair) and he proceeds to hide and dispose of the body. Following this climactic act, in which he is able to work out his repressed feelings about his wife’s infidelity, Ed becomes more open to discussing how they are both to blame for not addressing the stresses and anxieties within their relationship (as they are now both guilty of some form of “transgression” – adultery and murder).

After acknowledging that they have both been “unfaithful,” the film culminates with Ed’s confession to Constance that he has murdered Paul and her consequent decision to “forgive” him, thereby giving her the final active choice in the narrative. The final moment of the film is ambiguous and left open to interpretation however, as Constance and Ed are shown stopped at a red light outside of the police station, contemplating whether or not to confess that Ed has murdered Paul or choose to stay together as a family (with their young son Charlie played by Erik Per Sullivan) and risk being found out. Ultimately, because the films focuses on the repressive relationship between Ed and Constance, it relates directly back to Grant’s yuppie horror film cycle and Krzywinska’s “return of the repressed” narrative formula in that it depicts marriage, sex, and murder in somewhat complex and contradictory ways that challenge heteronormative and dominant ideological norms about such concepts (Figure 31 demonstrates the men across Lyne’s oeuvre as they struggle to cope with the “return of their repressed” desires and fears).
Conclusion

The men and women in Lyne’s films respond to sex/express themselves sexually in vastly different ways. When analyzing Lyne’s films in relation to the “sexual initiation and self-discovery” narrative formula and the “sexual melodrama” sub-genre, it can be observed that the women in Lyne’s films feel empowered through their sexual experiences. On the opposite end of the spectrum however, when analyzing Lyne’s films in relation to the “return of the repressed” narrative formula and the “yuppie horror film” cycle, it can be observed that the men in Lyne’s films attempt to escape from the pressures and anxieties of their daily lives through sex, which allows them to address their repressed sexual desires, but also causes their sense of self and control to collapse. Therefore, the connections between Lyne’s films discussed within this chapter are interesting to consider in that they both reinforce and expound upon the arguments made in Chapter 2 and 3 surrounding how his work attempts to challenge and question traditional gender roles and sexuality – and how he has a tendency to position the women as the stronger and more dominant characters and the men as the weaker and more vulnerable ones. Through such “transgressive” characterizations of sex and gender, Lyne’s films can be seen as ultimately presenting a mixture of elements from the “sexual initiation and self-discovery” and “return of the repressed” narrative forms, which also contributes to reading them as attempting to “create discussion” and “challenge the status quo.”
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY

Conclusion: The “Impossible Contradictoriness” of Lyne’s Films

Although Lyne’s work has not been studied as part of an auteur’s oeuvre before now, this study sought to show how his films can be opened up to new and previously unexplored meanings when they are analyzed through auteur criticism, with attention to their “basic” and recurring motifs, or “signatures.” According to Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (quoted in Bywater and Sobchack), “the tenets [or purpose] of auteur theory” can be summarized in the following way,

The purpose of auteur criticism – becomes to uncover behind the superficial contrasts of subject and treatment a hard core of basic and often recondite motifs. The pattern formed by these motifs – is what gives an auteur’s work its particular structure, both defining it internally and distinguishing one body of work from another. (p. 57)

Through an in-depth study of Lyne’s films, my main goal was to “uncover” their common and “defining” elements, despite their many differences and contradictions. Overall, I quickly discovered that the most common “recondite motif” in each of Lyne’s films could be described as a non-heteronormative and subversive ideological perspective, which can also be considered his “auteur brand.” In each chapter, a very specific set of theoretical discourses was adapted and applied to analyze Lyne’s films as a way of demonstrating how they consistently attempt to challenge and/or question and “create discussion” about ideological norms around gender, sexuality, and class. In conducting a full-length study of Lyne’s films, I also aimed to show how his work is a significant “link in the chain” of Hollywood filmmaking (and pop culture) that should be acknowledged when one looks back on (stylistically, thematically, and ideologically) influential films (and filmmakers) to have emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in American mainstream cinema. I feel that it is once again important to state that when one simply examines the marketing images for Lyne’s films (such as those discussed in Chapter
1), the underlying connections between them are made visible, which also suggests how strong the bonds are between each of them and how they can be distinguished as Lyne’s “products” in many ways.

More to this point, in formulating this study it quickly became clear that one of the most unique and defining “motifs” of Lyne’s films (that I was most drawn to) is the intricate and intimate ways that they attempt to explore the most basic and “universal” aspects of the human condition. As Elsaesser says of the characters and stories commonly found in family melodramas, “What strikes one as the true pathos is the very mediocrity of the human beings involved, putting such high demands on themselves, trying to live up to an exalted version of human being, but instead living out the impossible contradictions that have turned the American Dream into its proverbial nightmare,” which is how one could also describe the underlying premise of Lyne’s work – including his short films and commercials as discussed in Chapter 1 (p. 188). For example, as discussed in each of the chapters to some extent, the female protagonists in Lyne’s films often struggle with feelings of “alienation” and insecurity, but they are also given a strong voice and sense of agency and empowerment, which is uncommon in other mainstream Hollywood films. As also discussed in each of the chapters to some extent, I attempted to showcase how the men in Lyne’s films are often trapped by their own insecurities and their inability to face the anxieties of their everyday life, which “exposes” their vulnerabilities and humanizes them in a way that is also rarely seen in mainstream films. Finally, as discussed in Chapter 4, all of the characters (the women and the men alike) in Lyne’s films use “sex” as a way of coping with the various challenges in life and it is his through his lavish and explicit exploration of sex that his films continuously “walk across” the barriers or push the boundaries of how sex/sexuality is explored within mainstream film. Consequently, through the
variety of ways that Lyne’s films attempt to explore the human condition, it could be argued that 
they are open to endless possible readings, even beyond those discussed throughout this thesis, as 
they are also “impossibly contradictory” and ripe with layers of meaning for future studies to 
explore in new and innovative ways.

What’s Next For Lyne?

In the last couple of years (in coincidence with this study), a “renewed fascination” with 
Lyne’s films (or his nostalgic “renaissance” in film/television and popular and culture) seems to 
be emerging as several “new developments” have been announced in relation to his work. 
Consequently, several of these “new developments” are now discussed.

First, with the release of the first film in the high-profile Fifty Shades of Grey franchise in 
February of 2015, a variety of online sites released articles (including fan blogs/fan sites, 
magazines, and journals) discussing the numerous connections between Fifty Shades of Grey and 
9½ Weeks, as they both intimately explore the dynamics of a sexually-experimental BDSM- 
based relationship. In one article on The Hollywood Reporter website entitled, “Before 'Fifty 
Shades,' How '9 1/2 Weeks' Director Put S&M Onscreen” (written on 02/12/15 – the day before 
the film’s U.S. theatrical release), Seth Abramovitch discusses the historical reception of 9½ 
Weeks and includes a new interview with Lyne in which he discusses the making of the film. 
Then again, in January of this year, with the announcement that Kim Basinger had been cast as 
the “experienced dominatrix” Elena Lincoln (former lover of the titular male protagonist 
Christian Grey played by Jamie Dornan) in the two sequels (Fifty Shades Darker is set to 
released on February 10, 2017 and Fifty Shades Freed is set to be released at some point in 
2018), yet another new faction of viewers began to make connections between the film series and
9½ Weeks. One review on Today.com entitled “Kim Basinger set to get ‘Fifty Shades Darker’ in movie sequel” (published on January 29, 2016 and written by Randee Dawn), went so far as to call her role in 9½ Weeks a “pre-cursor” to Fifty Shades of Grey in and of itself. Although the release of the Fifty Shades films only seems to have sparked a renewed interest in Lyne via 9½ Weeks, it is important to acknowledge in that the release (and widespread popularity) of the Fifty Shades franchise can also be seen as introducing new discourses about Lyne’s films and as putting a “fresh spotlight” on his work for a new generation of viewers.

Second, the first Hollywood remake of Lyne’s films is set to be released next year (2017). The film is an updated version of Jacob’s Ladder (directed by David M. Rosenthal and starring Michael Ealy as Jacob) and it is already sparking a renewed interest in Lyne’s work as many online articles/posts have already begun to appear over the last few months in which viewers are discussing the original film. On imdb.com, one message board on the new film’s page entitled “Hell no.” (started on April 5, 2016 by username RydersLadder) includes a discussion thread in which several viewers express objections to the remake and in which they communicate a personal attachment to, reverence, and nostalgia for Lyne’s original version. For example, one of the comments included in thread is “The original Jacob’s Ladder was one of the most original films so much so that I can hardly find the words even now to describe” (username Hillius), while another user’s comment exclaims, “One good thing about remakes is that a lot of people who haven’t seen the original, watch it to compare to the remake” (username iluvthedrama). Although the director claims that the film is “something more akin to an homage,” as the user on the imdb.com thread quoted above points out, it could be argued that this is just the beginning of Lyne’s films being “remade” (or “reimagined”) and “revisited” by filmmakers in the coming years, which will also expose a new generation of viewers to his work.
(Rosenthal quoted in an entry written by fan blogger Jack Giroux).

Finally, in addition to a new audience being exposed to his films for the first time through the two aforementioned avenues, several rumors have surfaced over the last year that seem to suggest Lyne’s directing career may also be on track for a “come back.” In October of 2015, it was announced that Lyne was set to direct the film adaptation of A.S.A. Harrison’s novel *The Silent Wife* (McClintock). Then again, in May 2016 (on deadline.com and flickeringmyth.com), it was announced that Lyne was set to direct *Silence*, starring Halle Berry and his former colleague and leading man Michael Douglas (Hipes). Although further reports (or “confirmation”) of his involvement in these projects has yet to released, both films appear to be female-driven melodramas, and as such, they are similar to his past work. If Lyne actually does resume his filmmaking career, it will be interesting to see if and/or how the observations made about his films within this study can be adapted and expanded to his explore his future work. As discussed in Chapter 1, it is interesting that Lyne’s work is continuing to be talked about in today’s film and television culture considering that past critics and scholars failed to recognize the influence and importance of Lyne’s work in American cinema and culture. For example, just this past summer I was at a professional baseball game in which a *Flashdance* parody was shown on the video scoreboard, featuring the team’s mascot dancing to “Flashdance…What A Feeling” (complete with choreography from the film). Now, while I doubt that most of my fellow spectators knew who directed the film, it absolutely delighted me to be reminded of just how far reaching of an influence Lyne’s work still seems to have on today’s culture (even in the most “unexpected” places).

Considering his “renaissance” in film and culture today (which can also partly be attributed to the rise of reception/fan discourses on “New Media”/Social Media platforms and
websites in general in the last decade—such as those cited throughout this section), the most appropriate way to end this study naturally seemed to be to show how Lyne’s films still retain some “cultural saliency” in that they are continuing to produce new conversations and readings. In closing then, I hope that future studies do continue to pursue opening Lyne’s films up to new meanings, and based on “recent events,” I believe that to be well within the realm of possibility.
91/2 Weeks. Directed by Adrian Lyne, performances by Kim Basinger, Mickey Rourke, and Margaret Whitton, MGM/UA, 1986.


Doane, Mary Anne. The Desire to Desire: The Women’s Film of the 1940s. 2nd ed., Indiana University Press, 1987.


Spicer, Andrew. Film Noir (Insider Film). Longman/Pearson, 2002.


*Unfaithful*. Directed by Adrian Lyne, performances by Diane Lane, Richard Gere, Olivier Martinez, and Erik Per Sullivan, 20th Century Fox, 2002.


