

Gender and the Social Norm

Brian De Palma's film, *Dressed to Kill*, was released in 1980 and became an instant mainstream thriller. The attention and praise this film received relies on understanding why the horror genre appeals to so many people. "Major artists of our time have worked seriously in it and produced notable films that range beyond the depiction of the horrific event to probe the nightmare world hidden in all of us" (Solomon 112). The notability of this film does not derive from its bloody attributes, but rather from the suspense created through its ability to reveal the psychology behind the monster and victim. Filled with issues regarding identity and sexuality, this film is able to indirectly challenge the contemporary ideology of gender roles.

The film opens with an erotic dream sequence that reveals one of the film's most central motifs: sexuality. "Sexuality seems to be a unique point of moral concern for the broader society, and controversies over representations of sexuality tend to focus on fairly abstract senses of morality and social norms" (Phillips 36). One of the ways a film can provoke controversy in relation to these social norms is "when films depict acts or attitudes that are in gross violation of existing norms concerning, in the present case, sex, sexuality, and gender" (Phillips 37). This film is able to immediately provoke this kind of controversy within the opening scene and throughout the rest of the film. The first shot takes place in an empty bedroom. The camera gracefully tracks forward and through the bathroom doorway to reveal a woman in the shower, staring with longing at a man who is shaving in the mirror. We later learn that this woman is Kate Miller, a middle aged wife and mother, who is sexually unsatisfied within her marriage. The camera then zooms towards Kate's face and cuts to multiple close up shots of her body in the shower. While her face would reveal her to

be a woman of middle age, the images of her body suggest that she is much younger. Her body language and facial expressions would make it seem as though we are witnessing some sort of masochistic fantasy, a beautiful woman flaunting herself in front of her husband. However, a point-of-view shot from within the shower allows the viewer to identify with Kate instead. The shot reveals a distorted image of her husband. The glass is fogged from steam and the water running down makes his image less visible. This whole time he never looks at her, casually sliding the straight razor across his throat. This reveals that Kate is exploiting herself because she wants to be an object of the male gaze, but is being denied that gaze. Suddenly, a man appears in the shower and begins raping her. Screaming for her husband's attention, this time because of victimization rather than exploitation, the camera cuts to the same point-of-view shot used before. This time he finally looks at her, just before his image fades away, and the steam covers the glass completely. This sequence reveals Linda Williams' concept of the gaze while also manipulating it. She states, "as Doane suggests, 'the woman's exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization.' The woman's gaze is punished, in other words, by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy" (Williams 61). In this case, Kate's own gaze and desire for sexual attention has caused this victimization.

This challenges the contemporary ideology concerning gender roles and sexuality due to the fact that what we just witnessed was Kate's own sexual fantasy. Meaning that her own repressed sexual identity has caused her to want to be the object of the male gaze, but expressing that desire will cause her to be victimized as well. The explanation of this can be attributed to "the whore-virgin dichotomy that took hold with a vengeance in the uptight fifties, in the dialectical caricatures of the 'sexpot' and the 'nice girl'" (Haskell xiii). Haskell continues, "The split was internalized in the moral code we adopted out of fear as well as out of an instinct for self-preservation" (Haskell xii). This means that because of historical and ideological conditions, Kate subconsciously relates her own sexuality to being victimized by men. This can be supported by Kate's identity within society. She is a middle aged, attractive, blonde, wife and mother who by social norms is expected to honor her husband and care for her family. This means following the stereotypical ideology of

womanhood by putting the needs of others above the needs of the self. If she chooses to go against the social norm she will be forever shamed by society, her family and she will lose her upstanding reputation. However, in Kate's case, acting upon these sexual desires will also have deadly consequences: a dramatized representation of the consequences a woman will face if she dares to contradict the social norm.

Soon after this sequence we follow Kate, ironically dressed in white, to the office of her psychologist, Dr. Robert Elliot. Psychologists within our culture are typically perceived as individuals who understand the difference between sanity and insanity: "Concepts such as the unconscious and the shadow-self became buzzwords for the burgeoning new psychological era" (Packer 141). This means that two or more personas are able to live within a single human psyche, the projected self and the unconscious self. It is within this scene that the film's main motif of doubling reveals itself to us. In Kate's case, she's torn between acting on her sexual desires and maintaining her role as a faithful wife and mother. When asked about her husband, she states that he had sex with her that morning and that she was mad at him. This reveals that it is not sexual attention she craves, but sexual satisfaction. Dr. Elliot then asks if she told her husband why she was mad at him. She simply replies, "of course not." Due to cultural conditioning, Kate is unable to reveal this truth to her husband because it would mean revealing her unconscious self to someone who only perceives her projected self. Revealing this self would contradict everything her projected self stands for. Out of fear of consequence she is unable to unite the two, thus creating the separation within herself.

The conversation continues with Kate asking, "Do you find me attractive?" When his response is yes, she continues, "Well would you want to sleep with me?" He responds again with, "yes," to which she replies, "Well then why don't you?" It is here that Dr. Elliot's own hidden self is implied to us. The camera cuts from an up-close shot of his face, to a shot of his reflection in a mirror as he plainly states, "Because I love my wife and sleeping with you isn't worth jeopardizing my marriage." The fact that he states this while the camera is focused on his reflection implies doubling, or that he isn't being truthful. It is here that we are given the first hint that Dr. Elliot also has a hidden side to himself that he does not

wish to reveal: “By reversing the role of the psychiatrist in *Dressed to Kill*, De Palma implies that the psychiatrist is indistinguishable from the patients he treats in his well-tended office” (Packer 151). Like his patient Kate Miller, Dr. Elliot also has his own repressed sexual identity within himself. We later learn that Dr. Elliot is a closet transvestite and Kate has just triggered a malicious event within his split personality.

A jump cut takes us to a bird’s-eye shot of Kate walking up a sophisticated staircase. After pausing on a statue in front of the building, Kate appears in the next shot in the right side of the frame. The left reveals that she is inside an art museum and a painting of a woman in the center of the frame appears to be looking at her. All the while Kate spends her time gazing at other people walking around the museum more often than she does looking at the actual art. She also jots down trivial reminders that depict stereotypical concepts regarding a woman’s role such as, “get turkey.” The significance of this resides in the fact that museums display representations of people, not the people themselves. This means that Kate spends most of her life living as a representation of who society wants her to be, rather than who she really is. This motif carries throughout the film through character doubling. We meet these character doubles during Kate’s tragic demise. After a handsome stranger lures Kate into a lengthy game of cat and mouse through the museum, Kate gives in to her desire and lives out her sexual fantasy in the back of a taxi cab. Later, while she’s preparing to leave the man’s apartment she finds paperwork that informs her that the man she just cheated on her husband with has a venereal disease. In her state of shock, she even leaves without her wedding ring: “Kate Miller is an archetype for the sexually alluring yet threatening woman of the Hollywood popular film. Ostensibly the stereotypical housewife who dreams incessantly of the Ultimate Orgasm, Kate is sultry, sexually insatiable, manipulative, and promiscuous; i.e, this woman is dangerous, and her brutalization is a not-to-subtle punishment for her too-menacing sexuality” (Palumbo 232). Right when you thought things couldn’t get much worse for poor Kate, the elevator doors open to reveal another woman. This woman looks extremely similar to Kate, but she is wearing black sunglasses and a black trench coat. Here we see the first implication of character doubling between these two. Kate

dressed in white, represents the stereotypical portrayal of women in film; where the woman dressed in black represents the dark side of what this portrayal means. Kate notices the woman is holding a straight razor. When the unknown woman moves toward her a brutal attack takes place. We later discover that this woman is actually Dr. Elliot's repressed female self, Bobby. Dr. Elliot has repressed his inner self so intensely that he has lost touch with reality and actually believes Bobby is just another patient of his. Mid-attack the elevator doors open and reveal the horrific scene to Liz Blake, a young blonde prostitute, and one of her male companions. She screams when she sees Kate Miller on the brink of death, lying on the elevator floor reaching towards her for help. Liz reaches back in return and in this moment the focus of the film is transferred from Kate to Liz. While Kate and Liz are not the same character, they are doubles for each other as well. They are two sides of a coin, where one cannot exist without the other.

We've established that Kate Miller is a representation of the stereotypical housewife. However, she does not display the typical moral standards associated with this stereotype. Her rebellious, unconscious self is doubled as the character Liz. Physically, the similarities appear to be pretty obvious between these two female characters. Liz looks as though she could be the younger, liberated version Kate Miller wished she could have been. Liz is a strong, independent woman who takes advantage of men and the social system, rather than letting it take advantage of her. These characters represent a new type of woman portrayed in film known as "the most significant development of the eighties, movies served up an endlessly expanding category of neurotics, murderers, femmes fatales, vamps, punks, misfits, and free floating loonies whose very existence was affront, not only to the old, sexist definitions of pliant women (or even categorizable psychotics), but also to the upbeat rhetoric of the women's movement" (Haskell 373). Due to the fact that Kate's existence revolves around her dependency on men, she is a representation of the conflict between the old, stereotypical definitions of women and the rise of the independent woman. Liz is a representation of the independent or "crazy" woman, a contradiction to the stereotypical "superwoman" depicted in films unwilling to challenge the social norm for decades: "The 'crazies' weren't the sultry (and diabolical) femmes fatales of traditional male fantasy, those

silky icons of the film noir whose self-possession represented a force beyond man's control and who were responsible for his 'fall,' but postfeminist types whose moves were orchestrated less by male needs than by some mysterious promptings of their own. They could be liberating as well as destructive, and even if they didn't break free of the romantic/sexual bond, they threw normal courting rules to the wind"

(Haskell 374). Living her life as a hooker outside of the law, Liz's character is able to encompass all of these concepts regarding the new portrayal of women. While she does rely on men and exploits her own body for money, she does so with the mindset that she is taking advantage of them rather than the other way around. Throughout the film she is able to take on multiple roles that are deemed socially acceptable and unacceptable. The opposite of Kate who represents a woman unable to take on multiple roles due to society's influence on her identity. Through character doubling, the film is able to contrast Kate's identity with Liz's in order to show that Liz is who Kate could have been if the oppression of social norms had not influenced her perception of what a woman can and cannot be. This reveals controversial differences in cultural concepts concerning womanhood over time.

The film even ends very similarly to how it began. First, Liz makes an appointment to talk with the seemingly safe Dr. Elliot at his office late one night. She does this because she suspects one of Dr. Elliot's patients to be the person who murdered Kate Miller and she needs to clear her name of the crime. Rather than witnessing a dream, like we did in the beginning of the film, Liz begins describing a sexually brutalizing dream she's been having after witnessing Kate's death. She states that within this dream she goes to visit a male friend at a house she's never been to before. She's watching TV when someone knocks at the door. It is a large, dark man who she lets in against her better judgement because he said that his car broke down. She then describes how the man begins to sexually assault her with a straight razor. A straight razor is an object used within the film as a representation of a man's masculinity. We first see one in the hands of Kate's absent husband within her dream, again as Bobby's weapon of choice, and once more in Liz's dream. The doubling of Liz and Kate's dreams by use of a straight razor and sexual assault reveal the victimization of women

in a patriarchal society. Confirming that for women, “The celebration of the sexual is always accompanied by a pervasive anxiety surrounding the construction of gender” (Martin 18).

It is within this scene that the story reveals to the audience that the male Dr. Elliot and his female identity Bobby are character doubles, but are also doubles for Kate and Liz. After Liz attempts to seduce Dr. Elliot, the disruption of his sexual identity triggers Bobby to take control. She then tries to attack Liz, revealing to us that when Dr. Elliot becomes sexually aroused by a woman, the woman inside of him takes full control of his mind and body and attempts to execute the woman that reveals her/his own masculinity. This would mean that a monstrous feminine lives within a male mind, revealing and also manipulating Creed’s theory that, “if we accept Freud’s interpretation that the ‘Medusa’s head takes the place of a representation of the female genitals’, we can see that the Medusan myth is mediated by a narrative about the *difference* of female sexuality as a difference which is grounded in monstrousness and which invokes castration anxiety in the male spectator” (Creed 2). In this case, Dr. Elliot is a male spectator within his own body. The repressed and oppressed sexuality of women throughout time represented through the monstrous feminine Bobby. Like Kate, Dr. Elliot has been culturally conditioned to obey social norms that define who a man and a woman can and cannot be. This means that much like his patients, Dr. Elliot is unable to unite his unconscious self with his projected self. Unfortunately, the severity of his repression has caused him to suffer from a split personality disorder where he loses touch with reality and becomes delusional. Kate and Dr. Elliot’s inability to take on multiple roles within society is doubled as the sexually liberated character Liz. This reveals that the depiction of the monstrous feminine portrayed in the film is a representation of the oppression within a patriarchal society and the influence of gender within that society.

Luckily for Liz, there was another female double within the film, the heroine police woman who manages to stop the monster and save Liz’s life. This woman is seen throughout the film as a blonde woman dressed like Bobby, suspiciously following Liz late at night. When these stalking scenes take place, the audience simply perceives this woman to be Bobby, who is meticulously stalking her next victim. Used as a plot twist within this film, the

doubling of these two characters is meant to represent gender and its relation to the role of monster and hero. The police woman was seen as the monster throughout the entire film until at the end when she was the reason for the demise of the monster. Like Kate and Bobby, the police woman is a representation of the new independent woman who wants to destroy the old portrayal of women in film. As for Bobby, in regard to Freudian theory, it is believed that the only reason a woman horrifies is because she is castrated (Creed 5). However, the villainous Bobby only exists because she is not castrated. “Neale argues that man’s fascination with and fear of female sexuality is endlessly reworked within the signifying practices of the horror film. Thus, the horror film offers an abundant display of fetishistic effects whose function is to attest to the perversity of the patriarchal order founded, as it is, on a misconception- the erroneous belief that woman is castrated” (Creed 5). Thus proving that through the manipulation of gender roles, this film is able to challenge contemporary ideologies concerning gender and its influence within the horror film.

“Movies are related in shifting ways to what may be called a collective consciousness of the society, to its present and immediate concerns” (Jarvie 104). In regards to the commercial film of the twenties, thirties, and forties, Jarvie states, “they had artificial stories, unreal characters, were set in untypically lavish surroundings, and did not accurately reflect the real life situations of most people living in the societies they portrayed” (Jarvie 137). While contemporary filmmakers did not wish to provoke negative publicity, they in turn promoted social norms by depicting stories that would never cause controversy. This film proves that over time, ideological concepts regarding sexuality and gender have changed. This film challenges the contemporary ideology of identity, sexuality and gender by revealing the effects of oppression in order to influence a change in the social norm.

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