

Chapter 1

“I’m Not Going to be *Ignored*, Dan”: Narrative Cues for Suspense and Intimidation

A list of the sights and sounds that anchor *Fatal Attraction* would likely include the following: A phone that suddenly rings, interrupting a dinner party. The sight of a couple enjoying a dinner of pasta and red wine, chatting over the mellifluous tones of *Madame Butterfly*. The sound of a boiling teakettle, emitting its high-pitched tone. An image of a woman and child, strolling through a suburban amusement park on a windy day. Taken out of context, none of these selections sound ominous, yet in *Fatal Attraction* each becomes a harbinger of danger, an emotional, visual, or aural evocation that a pestilence has been unleashed. The incessantly ringing telephone, for instance, intrudes jarringly and unexpectedly into the Gallagher home, a terrifying reminder of the scorned woman who uses it as a last desperate connection to the married man with whom she has become obsessed. (The telephone figures so strongly in the emotional register of *Fatal Attraction*, in fact, as to appear as the resting image in the menu for the 15th-anniversary DVD edition. Positioned next to shifting images of Michael Douglas and Glenn Close, the white phone sits against an all-white background and rings intermittently.)

The phone rings a total of ten times in the film, a number that perhaps belies the forceful sensation of disruption that accompanies each of these intrusions. Prone to phone at any time of the day or night, Alex is as likely to interrupt the Gallaghers’ sleep as she is to intrude on their moving day. Cut off from all other means of communication, Alex employs the phone for a perverse objective: even if she cannot have Dan, as she intones so brilliantly, she will *not*

be forgotten. Soon, even the suggestion of a ring is enough to make Dan, the guilty, harangued husband, sweat, gasp, and run for the phone. Patent is his relief when the caller is not Alex, although, like a Pavlovian casualty, Dan's reprieve is only momentary, lasting until the next caller – innocent or not.

The propensity to make the ordinary seem frightening serves as a mainstay of the horror and thriller genres, genres to which *Fatal Attraction* owes considerable allegiance. Chapter Two catalogues these various affiliations and Chapter One prepares for such a discussion by atomizing the film's chilling effects in order to unpack how they are manufactured through formal, film-specific strategies, technological components that coalesce in such a way so as to produce maximum emotional intensity. It is easy to cite, for instance, the discovery of the boiled bunny in the Gallagher family kitchen as a terrifying moment. Easier to forget, however, is that the sequence is shot and edited to emphasize the simultaneity of Ellen's (Ellen Hamilton Latzen) discovery that the bunny is gone, and Beth's (Anne Archer) vision of the bunny's lifeless body bobbing in a pot of steaming water. Unpacking the technical devices and structuring motifs that contribute to *Fatal Attraction*'s iconicity, this chapter argues that what we perceive as scary in the film has much to do with the text's ability to use cinematic devices to frame the ordinary in unconventional ways. The sequences and images to be analyzed include: white as a structuring color scheme; the phone; break-ins and the boiled bunny; and the motif of boiling water.

In Black and White

The opening shot of *Fatal Attraction* pans across a New York City skyline during an orange twilight, ventures past tall water towers and rooftops, and eventually arrives at the Gallaghers' New York apartment, a shot accompanied by sounds of the city street. As the camera closes in, Beth Gallagher appears in a window and pulls down a shade. The focus on windows and shades borrows blatantly from Hitchcock, who used the motif as a way of delineating activities and interests that

disturb the family, and similar moments can be seen in both *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and *Rear Window* (1954). *Fatal Attraction*'s opening nevertheless most closely mimics Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), which traverses the skyline of Phoenix before entering the motel room of a couple having an affair. Yet while *Psycho*'s camera locates the couple by travelling through their window in a continuous shot, penetrating its interior, *Fatal Attraction* cuts after the shade is pulled down. Audiences can no longer look from afar because Beth has blocked the sightline, a move that suggests her ability (at this point) to protect her family from unwanted intrusion.

On the other side of the window, the scenes are also wholly different. In *Psycho* the camera's entry into this transient space underscores the seediness of the actions taking place within it. Outside the sanctity of a marriage, a couple meets illicitly in an impersonal hotel room, their matrimonial prospects made pessimistic when Sam (John Gavin) tells Marion (Janet Leigh) that marriage would be difficult because he is still dogged by alimony payments to his opportunistic and undeserving ex-wife. *Fatal Attraction*'s homage to the opening of *Psycho* patently inverts this tone of marital desperation and capitulation – rather than suffering the burdens of fiscal inadequacy, the Gallaghers are clearly enjoying its bounties. Conveying a sense of comfortable abundance, the first indoor shot of the Gallaghers' condo features a space cluttered with the detritus of family life: toys are strewn about, underclothes hang in the bathroom to dry, and a dog rests lazily on the couch beside a happy child.

Palpable is the sense of familial harmony, a sensibility nicely underscored by the family's apparel. Clothed all in white, the family appears in varying stages of undress: Dan wears a shirt without pants, as does his wife Beth, and their 5-year-old daughter Ellen sports an oversized tee-shirt, perhaps one of her father's.¹ Yet, the family inhabits their semi-nudity casually, as if there is no need or room for embarrassment in this domestic Eden. (Further confirmation for the uniformity of this unblemished world arrives via Ellen's babysitter who is also dressed entirely in white.) This structuring color scheme also continues after the couple returns home that same night, after Dan and Beth attend the book party at which Dan first makes Alex's

acquaintance. In this nighttime scene, a white-shirted Dan is corralled into taking the family dog for a walk before he retires. By the time he returns home, hoping to join the connubial bed, a white-shirted Ellen has already usurped his place there. In one of the many scenes where the camera shares Dan's subjectivity, Dan enters the room to find both his wife and daughter happily ensconced in their white sheets. Though a mildly exasperated look appears on his face, Dan is also sweetly tolerant, and the tone again identifies the Gallaghers' home as a harmonious domestic space. While Dan wished to spend the night with his wife, the scene most likely assigns him a lonely sojourn on the couch.

Perhaps not coincidentally, white also dominates another scene of coitus interruptus. While getting ready for a dinner party they are hosting, Beth appears in soft focus in white panties and a white bra seated in front of her vanity, bathed in soft orange light. The scene aligns the gaze of the camera with Dan's sightline, since Dan sits in a white shirt on the bed, watching her sensually apply lipstick and lotion, a look of enrapt attention and desire on his face. Overcome by desire for his wife, he approaches her, kisses her from behind and pries her legs apart, as they watch themselves in the mirror. Suddenly the doorbell blares, announcing the arrival of their guests. Again, the exasperation is palpable, but the scene suggests a momentary deferral of pleasure rather than an unyielding denial of it.

Such associations between white, the pristine state of the family's consciousness, and Dan's and Beth's easy sexual rapport might seem to make room for an obvious correlation between white and family sanctity, creating an opportunity for Alex to emerge as the dark other. Yet, the film complicates this schema, for Alex too becomes relentlessly associated with white, her frame topped off by curly blonde hair which is so light that it appears almost preternaturally white. She too has an all-white apartment, a white phone, an off-white umbrella, and she appears numerous times in white – in a white suit, in a white raincoat, in a white robe, in a white tee-shirt, in a white negligee, and in a white scoop-necked dress. While the Gallaghers' white life is shot, however, in soft red and orange tones, Alex's in turn often appears in cool blues. When associated with Alex, the film underscores white as

a stark blankness associated with a cold, lonely existence. This attribution is made most apparent in the numerous scenes set in her home, since Alex has little furniture in her cavernous loft apartment save a bed, nightstand, and dilapidated exercise bike. In this, whiteness presents a visual correlative to her apparently empty life – stark white walls, floors, and bedding mock her single state.

This presentation of Alex's apartment as playing host to little more than empty air was no doubt deliberate, and, while publicizing the film, director Adrian Lyne made a habit of repeating the factoid that in order to get a feel for how a single career woman's apartment should look, he previewed Polaroids of actual editors' apartments in New York. His remarks on what he saw in those shots did nothing to endear him to feminists, for he was particularly fond of pointing out that he found such spaces rather spartan and depressing. In one of the many reported iterations of his impressions, he notes in the director's commentary that all the women had were "piles of manuscripts by the bed; it was rather mournful."² When associated with Alex, white colludes with a larger visual project of recording a life that is harsh and empty, an existence she tries hard to populate (both literally and figuratively). Connoting not abundance but absence, Alex's white life has a harsh, antiseptic feel.

White is not the only schema to which Alex is assigned, however, for she appears in black frequently as well. In particular, Alex wears black when she is out in public, and especially when intruding on Dan's life in some way. She wears a black dress the first time they meet, and sports a black leather coat when she appears in his office, on the night that she follows him home to his country house, and on the day that she takes Ellen to the amusement park. A close reading of the color palette of *Fatal Attraction* thereby reveals a film whose visual meanings are contextual, and perhaps, more aptly, interrelational. While there is hardly a precise pattern to Alex's fashionable ensembles, she tends to trade in contrasts – she appears in either black or white, with heavy make-up, such as dark eyeliner and red lipstick, or without any make-up at all, as she is in the film's climactic final scene. The stark contrast between these two extremes complies with her characterization as a woman who resides only on the poles of existence: either intensely



Alex arrives uninvited for a surprise visit at Dan's office.

sexual, or intensely enraged, dramatic oppositions inform her emotional register and correlate in turn to her visual appearance. The alternation of black and white also bespeaks the film's noir-like preoccupations with good and evil, since the temptation of the dark side competes with the allure of the familiar and safe. Alex's color fluctuations code her as a figure who shape-shifts between these binaries; though she can move within the supposedly morally pure world, she threatens to contaminate it with her dark impulses.

Fatal Attraction's primary interest lies in the dynamics of a family triangulated by an intruder, and the film's color evocations speak to these psychological relations, tracing as they do the configurations between husband and wife, husband and mistress, and mistress and wife. The morning after Dan spends the night with Alex, for instance, he returns home to his apartment and wears a blue dress shirt, open at the neckline, as he sits on the phone with Beth. Talking at the other end of the line, Beth appears in a full-length blue fall coat, partially open, and both types of apparel make a deep V on their wearer's chest. As they converse, the ensembles of husband and wife visually mirror each other. Beth is not yet aware of the affair, thus this color mapping renders the marital relation as still unified and strong. Notably, we never see Alex in blue, a color that is perhaps reserved for the rightful couple. Yet, later that same day Alex aggressively and deliberately rips Dan's blue shirt, the same one he wore while on the phone with his wife.

Symbolic color configurations also organize the spectacle which occurs the night that Dan brings the bunny home to Ellen, in a vision inspired by a Norman Rockwellian aesthetic. Beth and Ellen sit on

their living-room floor, dressed in white, and the family is again lit in soft, orange hues. The bunny too is white, which the film emphasizes by later revealing that Ellen has named him “Whitey.” This time Dan sports a dark coat, as he has just returned home in a rental car after Alex destroyed his car by pouring acid on it, his commute accompanied by her frantic taped ravings. While the family is inside their country home, Alex stands outside the picture window looking in, wearing a black coat that strongly echoes Dan’s. While Alex is spatially removed from the scene, a fact that precipitates her vomiting, Dan is perhaps not as present inside the home as he would appear. Instead, the color palette distances Dan, rendering him unable to fully participate in Beth’s and Ellen’s excitement and surely reflects his now panic-stricken state of mind. In a similar iteration of Dan’s increasing isolation from the family, the night that Dan finally tells Beth about the affair he is dressed all in black, whereas she wears light khaki pants and a white, lightly patterned shirt. Again, the dissonance between their outfits reflects the psychological break in their family.

While Dan and Beth grow gradually dissimilar in their appearance, Alex and Beth begin echoing each other more strongly. The night of the book party Beth appears in a black suit with a low neckline, which looks like a slightly more conservative version of what Alex wears, a shimmery black dress with a plunging v-neck that stops below her breasts. Their hair, while different colors, is actually styled similarly, appearing teased and high, and Beth’s hair gets bigger and more out of control as the narrative proceeds, thus mimicking Alex’s medusa-like locks. That the two women double in this way suggests again how color in the film is used as a configuration; while they are meant to represent opposing poles, the women shadow each other visually and psychologically throughout the narrative. Each woman owns a white terrycloth robe (Beth wears hers the night of Alex’s final attack) and in that climactic death duel both women are wearing white.

These configurations establish themselves so well because *Fatal Attraction*’s colors are by and large drab or washed out; the film’s monochromatic palette consists mainly of blacks, whites, warm blues and oranges. However, red participates in this schema as well, although as an outlier to this palette, it signals something dire or unexpected.³

Alex's long red fingernails are, for instance, a giveaway to her sultry danger, and Dan's ensnarement in this world is visually recorded when he, after leaving her apartment the morning after their first night together, is bathed in an intense red light. His imbrication in Alex's realm is gestured to as well when a shock of red blood appears on Dan's face after Alex's suicide attempt. Audiences see the blood before Dan does, as she embraces him and smears her blood on him, which he does not initially know. Shock cuts reveal her bloody wrists, and the red again stands out against her all-white shirt, apparel not dissimilar to a straitjacket. In Lady Macbethian fashion, Dan's face and hands are stained with Alex's blood, a symbol perhaps of her intention to make his sin visible and punishable.

While the blood here signals a death wish, the film at times uses red in more playful ways, namely by linking blood to the wine and spaghetti sauce the couple consumed earlier that same evening. In another gesture of deliberate doubling, Beth, like Alex, makes Dan spaghetti, and twice Beth reminds him that she has left it in the fridge. However, for Dan the price of eating Alex's spaghetti rather than his wife's is quite steep – before the night is over, Dan will not only consume Alex's spaghetti sauce, but also find himself bathed in her blood. The film's sly joke that the red spaghetti sauce can transmogrify into blood signals how quickly the domestic can turn deadly, since the appetizing turns nauseating, not unlike the affair. As soon as Alex's red blood appears it is already too late for Dan to extract himself from her clutches; indeed, the only escape lies, in the end, in *her* bloody death. Dan, of course, does take temporary measures to whitewash the evidence of his crimes against the family – the incriminating uneaten spaghetti is fed to the family dog, Alex's scent is vanquished by a shower, and her bloodied wrists are cleaned and bandaged. Yet, as we will see in the next section, Alex refuses to be dismissed quite so efficiently.

Sorry, Wrong Number

It is a slight exaggeration, but not a totally unreasonable assertion, to say that because the text on which *Fatal Attraction* is based organizes

itself around a series of phone calls, the telephone is *the* central motif in the film. *Fatal Attraction* was conceived after producer Sherry Lansing saw James Dearden's *Diversion* (1979), a short film whose basic plot Dearden described as follows:

A writer takes his wife to the station in the morning with their child and sees them off. Then he picks up the phone and rings a girl whose number he's got. He takes her out to dinner, takes her to bed. He thinks that's the end of it, but the phone rings the next day and it's her. So he goes over to see her and spends Sunday with her. And Sunday evening she freaks out completely and cuts her wrists ... He stays the second night and gets home early in the morning. His wife gets back. The phone rings and it's the girl. He fobs her off and the phone rings again and the wife goes to pick up the phone and you know that's going to be it. She's going to find out about the affair. The wife picks up the phone and says hello, and the screen goes black. (Quoted in Faludi, 1991: 117)

Diversion's director Dearden was later employed to write the screenplay for *Fatal Attraction*, and this description of his earlier film highlights the ubiquity of the phone in both *Diversion's* and *Fatal Attraction's* renderings of scorned women who use this technology to wreak havoc on their wayward lovers and their families.⁴ Phone terror has, of course, myriad variations, and classical American cinema has famously featured phones that will not stop ringing, callers who seem to know too much about what the receiver is doing and saying, and even characters who accidentally overhear plans for their own murder. In *Fatal Attraction* the phone's presence turns too on the question of communication, as if to advertise its twofold, self-contradictory promise – while inviting proximity, the phone simultaneously and often perversely denies precisely the connection it promises to deliver.

The first phone call in *Fatal Attraction* occurs just minutes into the film's opening; tellingly, Dan does not hear it. As he listens to headphones while working on the couch, the phone rings unacknowledged until his daughter breaks in, "Daddy, telephone." This innocuous call, a simple request from a female friend to know what Beth plans to wear to the upcoming book party, coheres with the Edenic scene that

opens the film. As discussed in the previous section, Dan is still innocent, and thus has no reason to fear the party on the other end of the line. Later phone calls will prove far more unsettling.

Alex's association with the phone tellingly begins from the first time she is introduced. In their initial meeting, Dan asks Alex to explain her "connection" to the book party they attend; the following Saturday morning Dan and Alex re-meet, and she mentions having called the author she represents. Later that night, she remarks to Dan that she phoned her original date to cancel, a comment that may very well be disingenuous. This association between Alex and the phone thus begins harmlessly enough, and only gradually turns ominous. Returning home on the Sunday morning after his night with Alex, Dan calls his wife's parents from his kitchen, and suddenly the phone rings again – Dan clearly expects it to be Beth. Pausing on photos of Dan, his dog, and his child, the camera lingers on the phone, signaling to the viewer what will be the first of Alex's many unwanted calls.⁵ Answering unawares, Dan gets the first taste of Alex's wrath: she comments, "I woke up, and you weren't here. I hate that." Dan accuses her of not giving up, yet he palliates her when he agrees to spend the day together in the park. Dan's capitulation to this demand is however one of his many mistakes, for it gives Alex perhaps an overinflated sense of the sway that her phone calls hold. As is soon made clear, her calls will quickly lose their effectiveness.⁶

From this point on, the phone bespeaks Alex's unrelenting will and serves as a metonym for her persistency. Subsequent to their weekend together Dan makes clear his intention to extricate himself from their romance and to return to his family life, yet Alex repeatedly attempts further communication. The violation wrought by Alex's telephonic intrusions is most delicately depicted during scenes of familial intimacy or repose, such as the scene where a phone call interrupts Dan in bed with his wife. The camera pans across the bed, from a sleeping Beth to a sleeping Dan, to the clock which reads 2:13, to a black phone, which suddenly rings. Dan answers the phone and immediately begins to disguise Alex's identity with euphemistic work talk, and the scene shows Alex on a white phone pacing her apartment in a white negligee, demanding that they meet. Alex is shot from behind pillars, which

look to be lining and enclosing her, a melodramatic strategy that speaks to her sense of entrapment. (Notably, this is the last phone call of Alex's that Dan actually answers.) Another time, Alex calls during a dinner party the Gallaghers are hosting and Beth answers the phone and Alex briskly hangs up. Again, the sterility of her white apartment contrasts the homey dinner scene at the Gallaghers', as old friends laugh, joke, and imbibe together.

The place that the phone holds in Dan and Alex's respective lives vividly records the contrast between them – he lives in a family that makes and receives many calls, where she presumably makes many but receives few. Likewise, for Alex the phone serves as a last desperate connection to a relationship slipping from her grasp; for Dan, Alex's presumption of intimacy via the phone goes from the unsettling to the downright disturbing. The contrastive position of the phone in each of their emotional registers is spatially rendered in the hours following Alex's suicide attempt, when Dan stays with Alex for an additional night and quietly calls his wife from Alex's phone. The scene uncovers Alex's surreptitious, observational disappointment, beginning as the camera crawls downward, past a rainy window, revealing a white phone on a table beside the bed in which Alex pretends to sleep. While her side of the apartment is sterile, uncluttered and lit in cold blue tones, Dan stands across the room in a warm alcove, calling his wife on a different phone. Like his family home, this space is cluttered with papers, books, photos and lamps, is lit in soft orange light, and includes Dan's dog, who rests comfortably asleep on the floor beside him. The camera then pans back to Alex, quietly despairing in her colorless bed, as if to emphasize that stark contrast between these two spaces. Reposing alone in a room devoid of familial accoutrements, she hears Dan tell Beth he loves her, as Dan stands in a space that seems more reminiscent of his home than Alex's. Dan is physically though not emotionally available to Alex, a fact made clear by her relegation to a lonely bed, as her unringing phone sits in silent judgment.

The torment involved in the previous scene coalesces around Alex's awareness that Dan wants to communicate with his wife and not with her. Similarly adding to this insult is the fact that, once Dan leaves



Alex's incessant calling is visually associated with her massive appetites.

Alex's apartment, the phone stands as her only connection to him. Her manic calling thereby signifies a defiant refusal of *his* declaration of inaccessibility, and accessibility is precisely what Dan's marital status denies Alex. (As Dan says, "I like you. And if I wasn't with somebody else, then maybe I'd be with you. But I am.") Their relation escalates into a battle over what degree of accessibility Dan owes Alex, and clearly she feels entitled to more than he grants. Dan's decision to change his home phone number following Alex's insistent calls wordlessly answers and rebuffs precisely this desire, and elicits an enraged response from her. Subsequent to this rejection, the film shows Alex, home alone, sitting on her bed in a black shirt and white pants, and surrounded by cartons of Häagen Dazs ice cream, Oreos, and Doritos, pleading with the operator to give her the new number, to restore her connection. Alex screams at the operator that this is an emergency, and the scene likens Alex's gorging on food with her hyper-consumption of Dan's life, using such an image in order to decry her out-of-control appetites. The technology, however, proves unyielding in that it will not answer Alex's desire for connection, and in turn highlights that Alex has few other mechanisms by which to restore her place in Dan's life. Her relation to the technology in the wake of such refusals complies with J. P. Telotte's general assertion that "the telephone represents the barriers to desire ... signaling a human *inability* to satisfy desire and overcome limitation in normal ways" (1989: 50). As Alex discovers, reaching out via the phone only to have those actions rebuffed indirectly confirms the distance between her and the family at the other end of the line.

Taken from Alex's perspective, one might argue that her attempts at communication protest the fact that the affair proceeded throughout according to the logic of Dan's schedule. When his wife was away Alex's telephonic persuasions proved effective; only when Beth returns does the phone call no longer hold sway. Taken aback by what she perceives as this sudden rejection, Alex also understands the phone call as a duty she is owed. Picking up the phone, as Avital Ronnel reminds us, places the recipient in the position of being the call's "beneficiary, rising to meet its demand, to pay a debt ... It is a question of answerability. Who answer the calls of the telephone, the call of duty, and accounts for the taxes it appears to impose" (1989: 2). Notably, Alex introduces questions of interpersonal responsibility in precisely the same terms, clearly feeling that Dan should take her calls, and that she is justified in asking him to do so. As she says, she is going to be the mother of his child, and she deserves some respect. When Dan names these behaviors sad and pathetic, she looks indignant and asks, "Well, what am I supposed to do? You won't answer my calls. You change your number. I'm not going to be *ignored*, Dan!" Here, Alex makes discursive alignment between the act of answering the telephone and the act of paying his debts, arguing that she is owed this response.

Dan's sense of the time and effort he owes Alex does not, however, extend much past their shared weekend together and thus to his mind, he has done all the "right" things. He stays the night following her suicide attempt, and when she comes to his office later that week, he sees her and wishes her well. Days later, he takes her call again at the office, when it is clear she has been calling all day. Afterwards, however, he instructs his assistant not to put her through any more. It would be a stretch to say the film condones Alex's desperate attempts at communication; instead, Dan elicits sympathy because Alex's behavior becomes unreasonable. What more, he (and we) ask, could she want from him? What more is he obliged to do? In the film's logic, Alex is the one who fails to live up to the implied contract of the one-night stand because she demands the relationship's longevity, and uses the phone to insist on its continuation. To compensate for these denials, Alex insinuates herself in increasingly more egregious and insistent ways into Dan's life, such as posing as a prospective buyer for

his family's Manhattan condo, and in the process securing for herself the family's now unlisted number.⁷

Alex's determination to regain access to Dan via the phone makes use of the phone's most searing communicative potential, namely, its ability to facilitate an instantaneous, irreversible connection. This observation is reiterated by Alex's verbal reminder to Dan that the phone can upend one's life instantaneously. In a moment of rage Alex tells Dan, "I'll tell your wife," and when he threatens to kill her if she does, she screams, "It only takes a phone call!" The phone in this case becomes the technological equivalent of an outing since it does *only* take a phone call for Alex to instantly expose Dan, and in turn unravel his entire domestic life. She even begins making the call, appearing in a low-angle canted frame that bespeaks her frantic state of mind, but desists once Beth picks up, and Alex then throws the phone across the room. To have completed this call, however, would strip Alex of the one advantage she has in her and Dan's cat-and-mouse game, for she relies on Dan's dread of exposure to get him to appear at her bidding. (Dan acknowledges as much at the end of the film, when he tells Alex, via the phone, that it is over because Beth knows everything.)

The phone thus appears as the metaphorical tectonic plate of the film, consistently shifting ground beneath Dan's feet. While some calls are merely tremors, others threaten to erupt and upend his entire domestic existence. The nagging fear that the phone will obliterate his family's already precarious isolation, for instance, animates Dan's reaction to a ringing phone during the move-in process to their new house in the country. Agreeing to relocate the family in part to escape Alex and the city, Dan is visibly unnerved when the sounds of the call suddenly pierce the quiet afternoon. To emphasize his abrupt attention shift, the camera slowly zooms into a close-up of the phone, which is sitting on the staircase behind black bars, a motion that visually renders Dan's anxiety and sudden inability to focus on anything else. Abruptly and unceremoniously dropping the table he is helping to move, Dan runs to the phone and, heart in his throat, picks it up. He smiles. "Martha, Martha, It's Martha," he says three times, comically telling everyone in the house. Martha, thank god.



The close-up of the ringing phone reveals Dan's fear of who waits on the other end of the line.

The interplay between the promise of proximity and the simultaneous denial of it organizes the presentation of the phone in *Fatal Attraction*, although the film understands this motif differently for the characters of Dan and Alex. For Dan each of the phone's rings threaten exposure, while the apparatus frustrates Alex, beckoning a communication ultimately (and repeatedly) denied. The phone's presence in the film thus nicely echoes its major themes, namely the interplay between secrecy and exposure, the looming destruction of trust, and the encroaching dangers of communication that is unwanted and out of place. Not coincidentally, these themes also encapsulate the adultery narrative. Adultery in some ways is about the wrong people coming too close, as Tony Tanner contends, "adulteration implies pollution, contamination, a base admixture" (1979: 12). The phone literalizes this metaphor because it allows for such entrances, for the crossing of borders and boundaries, for the mix-up of bodies and spaces. Alex uses the phone to enter these places, to make visible the intrusion Dan's adultery has sanctioned, and in essence to try and facilitate a swap between herself and Beth.⁸

At the same time Dan's adultery discombobulates his own familial space, in the sense that it results in his displacement from his family. After Dan reveals his affair, Beth makes Dan move out of their home. The phone again records the unnatural state that adultery precipitates, since Dan can no longer communicate in person with his daughter but must now satisfy himself with a brief nightly phone call. As a suddenly single parent, Dan adopts a position of exclusion akin to

Alex's since he is now also relegated to phoning his family from an impersonal space, his pathetic hotel room bespeaking his loneliness and alienation. Adultery's ability to displace bodies from their "rightful" places is here rendered with intense pathos, in the poignant physical separation of father and daughter.

The promise that the family will recuperate, however, is also contained in condensed form in the telephone narrative. The film's second-to-last phone call rights the wrongs of unwanted intrusion, when Beth puts a final stop to the swap that Alex so desires. She tells Alex that "if you ever come near my family again, I will kill you." Notably, this is the only time we see Alex receive a phone call, and, though Dan places the call, it bespeaks a break in the exclusivity of Dan's and Alex's relation, which Dan suggests when he tells Alex that "it's over" because Beth now knows everything. Beth's symbolic entry into the phone chain thus inculcates her intervention into the adultery narrative, a disruption that proves effective insofar as she later realizes her threat to kill Alex.

Break-ins and Boiled Bunnies

Because Dan's and Alex's affair takes place in public restaurants, elevators, hallways, and dance clubs, in addition to Alex's apartment, Dan's home remains pristine, safe from the desperate, groping, animalistic sexual encounters that characterize his affair. He deliberately does not bring Alex to his home, for clearly she does not belong there or in his office space, the two places she most tries to insinuate herself following the conclusion of their weekend together. The film thereby identifies Alex as an object figure who repeatedly enters the spaces where she is not wanted, and trains audiences to regard the sight of her with shock and suspicion. This section will categorize Alex's numerous break-ins and border violations, explaining how they collectively encourage audiences to regard Alex's mobility as pathological.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas writes of how dirt is "matter out of place" or that which we find inappropriate in a given context, a relevant conception to this section because Alex occupies precisely this

position – she is the mistress, not the wife, and her appearance, post-affair, in the spaces where only the wife should reside seems like an assault. As well, this conception of dirt as merely “matter out of place” resonates with Alex’s assertion that she refuses to be viewed as dispensable. As she says, “I won’t allow you to treat me like some slut you can just bang a couple of times and throw in the garbage.” While crass, Alex’s language indicates an actual truth, since garbage defines itself as that which we have once wanted and used and then decided to expel from our homes. Like garbage, Alex goes from the desirable to the abject – Alex insinuates that she knows she is now considered not only extraneous but also disgusting, a designation she actively refuses.

Alex’s demand that she not be treated like garbage is linked to her repeated demand that she be accommodated in spaces where she wants to go (rather than those to which she is invited). Her insistence on precisely this sort of mobility unites the film’s most metonymic moments, for in their own way each records her successful imbrication into spaces where *she* wants to be. Alex’s sinister quality resides in her ability both to appear unexpectedly and to make her presence known when she has not been seen. An exemplary moment of the former occurs, for instance, through a point of view shot that greets Alex’s sudden visit to Dan’s law office; the viewer cannot help but share Dan’s shock and surprise upon seeing her sitting in his office in a stark black coat. Because no visual or sound cues indicate Alex’s presence before the sight of her is granted, viewers are as unaware and unprepared as Dan to deal with her arrival.

The camera plays a similar trick when Dan enters his apartment and finds Alex posing as a prospective buyer for the family’s Manhattan condominium. As in the office scene, the film deliberately aligns the viewer with Dan’s perspective – we begin following Dan crossing a dangerous and busy intersection, where he almost gets hit by a car. Audiences then encounter Alex at the same time he does, as he hears familiar voices and walks into his living room aghast to find his jilted lover amicably having tea with his unsuspecting wife. Point of view shots feature both Alex and his wife looking directly at him (usually characters are at a slight angle from the camera); thus the technique conveys an eerie sense of visual assault. Both women gaze at him the

same way, making their separate identities somewhat indistinguishable. The blocking of the scene also records the exchangeability of the two women as they sit side by side on the couch, and the triangulation of the relation between Dan, Alex, and Beth is evidenced at the end of the sequence as Dan first stands between the two women, and then stands with Alex, bifurcated by Beth. Deviously, Alex also uses this opportunity to trick Beth into writing out the couple's now-unlisted phone number, a maneuver that spurs Dan to retaliate by appearing at her apartment. Yet, unlike Alex's unwanted intrusion, his visit serves as an almost perverse capitulation to Alex's desire for attention – Alex treats this visit as a social call and begins by offering Dan the drink of his choice.⁹

Certainly, the most memorable break-in of the film is the one we never see happen outright, although its bloody aftermath comprises the film's most iconic moment. *Fatal Attraction*'s intentionally jarring image of Whitey's bloody body peering out from its watery grave gave rise to the now-well recognized term "bunny boiler," and Alex's murderous act has come to be associated with the film writ large.¹⁰ The fact that Alex chooses to boil the bunny speaks acutely to her refusal to concede to the Gallaghers the pastoral seclusion that their county home supposedly affords. Dan buys and transports the bunny to his daughter only after they have moved, and the scene where he calls Beth to tell her that the bunny is coming home shows her painting the family hallway. Alex's murder of the bunny thus dramatically assaults the sense of safety supposedly offered by this bucolic setting, and in doing so she turns the Gallaghers' fantasy of being better able to control intrusion while in the country into something of an ironic joke. To wit: the Gallaghers are just as vulnerable in the country as they were in the city, and perhaps even more so because of the lack of neighborly surveillance.

The scene where Alex's murderous break-in is revealed highlights this sense of eerie isolation, and the tension of this scenario is heightened especially by the editing sequence that introduces it. The Gallagher family is returning home from an afternoon with Beth's parents, and the scene begins with a shot of their car pulling into the driveway, as the family tumbles out, the dog barks, and birds chirp in the late-afternoon autumn air. The tone turns ominous, however,

when the camera pans the interior of the empty Gallagher home, then remains stationary as Beth enters and begins turning on lights. The initial pan of the house has the intended effect of suggesting a presence in the house other than the entering Beth, and as discussed, the film repeatedly enunciates the myriad ways in which the sanctity of the Gallagher home has been violated. The bunny scene elliptically echoes these other scenes of domestic intrusion, although here the violation is perhaps even more personal: not only has Alex foraged through the Gallaghers' yard to collect Whitey, she has entered and cooked in the Gallaghers' *kitchen*, the primary site of female domesticity. Yet, the scene focuses not so much on the action of the break-in as on its terrifying aftermath, since Beth's attention is drawn to the kitchen where a stew pot sits atop a gas stove, boiling water streaming out from underneath the lid. Boiling water is also a structuring motif in the film, and its use here echoes other scenes that feature boiling teapots and coffeepots. Beth's eyeing of the pot and the eyeline match that shows the pot begin with mild curiosity, but the editing pace increases the tension and suspense, since precisely as Beth registers the pot and begins to walk toward it the film cuts to a tracking shot of Ellen running through their yard, en route to visit Whitey. Ellen's footsteps, crunching on the grass, echo through the shot, which then cuts to a zoom-in on the boiling pot and then a zoom-in on the rabbit hutch, motions which visually communicate each of the Gallagher females' more concentrated attention on the objects before them. As Beth walks closer to the stove the shots alternate between images of her and images of what she sees, as her awareness that something is amiss grows steadily stronger. The climax of this sequence occurs when Beth begins lifting the top of the pot, and the shot cuts to Ellen yelling, "Daddy!" Dan appears on screen in a reaction shot saying, "What?" and Beth opens the pot and screams. Mimicking the horror of these discoveries and further marking Dan as a powerless bystander to them, the camera zooms in on the bunny's bloody body, zooms in on Dan, who hears the screams, goes back to a shot of Beth screaming, then to a shot of Ellen yelling, "Whitey's gone!", then back to Beth yelling, "Dan!", and then finally to Ellen yelling, "Whitey's gone!" The crosscutting technique here adopts a dual point of view insofar as it



The film skillfully crosscuts between Beth and Ellen's gruesome discoveries.

reflects both Beth's and Ellen's state of mind, and confirms that the two discoveries happen at the same moment and lead to equally terrified reactions. As if to underscore the trauma, the next shot is of Ellen in bed, virtually comatose with grief.

The scene shrewdly uses the crosscutting technique to effect immediacy and urgency; as well, its pathos derives from its reminder

that Alex's single act of treachery creates multiple and simultaneous victims. As Mary Ann Doane reminds us, quoting and translating Jacques Goimard, "the pathetic is produced more easily through the misfortunes of women, children, animals, or fools" (1991: 286). The bunny scene in *Fatal Attraction* notably involves all these, relaying as it does the suffering of Beth (the woman), Ellen (the child), Whitey (the animal), and Dan (arguably, the fool). Tellingly, however, the man is spared the immediate horror; though implicated in both scenarios, Dan is left powerless in each. Beth yells for Dan, and Ellen screams, "Daddy!"; verbal invocations that make clear the responsibility he bears for having created this domestic nightmare. Yet at the same time Dan remains unable to stop the invasion, the cruelty that ensues, or the deadly discoveries to which both females are simultaneously subject. Chapter Four considers the film's reactionary view of adultery as a scourge that threatens the security of the middle-class family, but here it is useful to think about how the spatial logic of the bunny's discovery highlights Dan's impotence in the face of his family's obvious suffering. As he stands immobile in the middle of his yard, the blocking of the bunny scene underscores Dan's paralysis. Present beside neither his wife nor his daughter, Dan does not protect either family member from their twin traumas. In this way, the film provides visual recognition of the ineffectualness that plagues Dan for the duration of the film.

In much the same way, Beth and Ellen (rather than Dan himself) bear the burden of unwanted intrusions in the scene where Alex takes Ellen to the deserted fairground, and again, the Gallagher females suffer far more viscerally than does Dan. Beth, not Dan, goes to pick up Ellen from school, only to find her missing, and Ellen endures this afternoon, complete with a terrifying ride on a roller coaster that hardly seems age appropriate. Tellingly, the scene deliberately doubles Beth and Alex, the real mother versus the fake mother, and in turn identifies Alex as an interloper who endangers rather than protects the child. Constructed in such a way as to invite sympathy for Beth and Ellen, the scene identifies them as the innocent victims who must live a nightmare on Dan's behalf. Shot from Beth's point of view, Beth's entry into the school is greeted with quizzical looks from Ellen's

teachers, who say that Ellen has already been picked up. Hearing this, Beth immediately begins running down the hallway. Instantly frenetic, the pace matches Beth's increasing tension since the camera speeds up, tracking in back of her, both on her way into the classroom (where Ellen's classmate says simply, "She's gone") and again as she leaves. The scene continues from the perspective of inside Beth's car, and the shots alternate between close-ups of Beth's worried face and frantic point of view shots that register what she sees as she turns her head from left to right, scouring the streets for signs of her missing daughter.

As if to answer her desperation, the sequence cuts to a long shot of Playland, and Alex appears in profile, walking hand in hand with Ellen, as carnival music plays in the background. In a quick crosscut, Beth bursts through the front door of the Gallagher home, now screaming, "Ellen!" and the camera tracks inside an ice cream parlor, where Alex buys Ellen an ice cream. The scene again cuts back to Beth, who bounds up the stairs in her home, appearing in a canted frame that visually marks her sense of panic. The crosscutting mimics the frantic intensity of the bunny scene, and it continues as Beth runs back down the stairs, which the camera records in a high angle shot that both emphasizes Beth's powerlessness and renders her home instantaneously eerie. Devoid of Ellen, the home becomes the setting of a domestic nightmare, as it will also be at the film's climax. Cutting to an establishing shot of the roller coaster, then one of Alex and Ellen on the ride, the film correlates Beth's frantic search with the fearful anticipation of roller coaster thrills. Yet, in contrast to Beth, Alex and Ellen remain stoic; wind blowing in her hair, Alex looks at Ellen, who sits impassively on the ride. The sequence includes point of view shots which reflect Alex and Ellen's view of the roller coaster car ratcheting up the hill, and shots of Beth frantically driving her car. The editing sequence thereby visually links the frenetic winding up of the roller coaster to Beth's increasing desperation, as she drives in an increasingly reckless fashion.

Deliberately, spectators are taken along for both the car and roller coaster "rides," yet, because the unstoppable motion of the car mimics that of the roller coaster, the pace and energy are not so much exhilarating as they are terrifying. Alex and Ellen eventually begin

screaming, their pleasurable fear a shallow mockery of Beth's heart-wrenching despair as she asks, over and over, "Ellen, where are you?" Towards the end of the sequence, the graphic matching is also unmistakable: Alex braces for the roller coaster's terrifying descent, her neck muscles clenched, and a moment later, Beth braces for a car crash, since she cannot stop in time to avoid rear-ending a station wagon at a stoplight. The next time we see Beth, she is battered and bruised, lying in a hospital bed, much as Ellen reclined in bed following Whitey's untimely demise.

Collectively, these scenes of unwanted intrusion use editing to increase tension and suspense; as well, they portray Alex as an unstoppable source of kinetic destruction. The final section examines this kinesis by evaluating the importance of water to the film, and focuses in particular on how water encapsulates Alex's sexiness as well as her danger.

Bathrooms, Water, Sex, and *Psycho*

Fatal Attraction is a film literally oozing with fluids – rain, blood, tap water, acid, and vomit all make visible appearances. As discussed in the next chapter, the film further associates these fluids with Alex, as they help to identify her as a monstrous presence. However, the most salient of these fluids in *Fatal Attraction* is water, a substance not so much abject as it is sexually suggestive. A downpour spurs Dan and Alex to an impromptu dinner following a business meeting, for instance, and water noticeably accompanies *Fatal Attraction*'s first sex scene. Pushed up against the sink of her Manhattan loft, Alex reaches behind her to turn on the faucet, and repeatedly splashes water on her face, Dan's, and on her breast. The water continues to run as they have sex, and the couple fumble their way to the bedroom, Dan's pants down around his ankles. The scene highlights Dan's status as a bumbling lover and yet also serves as an erotic release, a sensation indicated by the fact that the shot cuts to a camera pan of the stove, where an old-fashioned coffee pot percolates. Unmistakably correlating the tap water and this now boiling water with sex, the film uses water as a shorthand for desire.

Heating water involves provoking it to the point that it is turbulent and irate, an observation the film mines shortly thereafter when Alex cuts her wrists following Dan's attempt to leave her on Sunday night. When Dan realizes what she has done, the moment is accompanied by loud, pounding kettle drums which underscore the rapid shift in the scene's emotional tenor. Taking her over to the sink, Dan forces Alex's hand under water as she screams in pain. While the running water previously bespoke an instance of sexual intrigue, it, like the spaghetti sauce, quickly turns sinister; suddenly bearing the charge of washing away blood, the water needs to salve the passion and the fury that the sex ignited. Subsequently, Dan runs around the house, a canted frame signaling his sense of panic and surprise, and he administers to her wounds in Alex's bathroom as rain pours and thunder rolls outside the window. The film thus makes the association between Alex, water, and passion explicit; as Kerstin Westerlund-Shands argues, Alex represents "Dionysian, or chthonian forces, forces connected with the caprices of nature, with uncontrollable eruptions, with overflowing liquidity, with sexuality, fertility, and reproduction, as well as with death" (1993: 115).

By pairing sex and suicide the film invokes a psychoanalytic chain of associations that link the sex drive to the death drive. Following Alex's kidnapping of Ellen, for instance, Dan forces his way into the apartment and brutalizes Alex, chasing her around and almost strangling her. The wild abandon of the earlier sexual encounter and especially its lawless quality transmogrifies into a desperate attempted murder – in both scenarios Alex makes Dan lose control, and the couple mutually sweat and gasp for breath. In the frantic chase around the apartment, they destroy furniture, overturn a bike, and break glass, and the scene's first climax occurs when Dan begins strangling Alex, his hands around her neck. He eventually lets go, and their panting exhaustion following this chase mimics the deep breaths that followed their love making. After the chase, Alex splashes water on her face from her sink, just as she did in the earlier sex scene, then grabs a knife from the kitchen, attempting to stab Dan. Water saturates this scene, and eventually Dan wrenches the knife away from her and leaves it on the counter. As in their first sex scene, no words are

exchanged between the couple. Their bodies speak passion, lust, and later hatred, yet the twinning of these scenarios confirms the inextricability and perhaps even the indistinguishability of desire and destruction. Commenting on the attack scene's final shot of Alex smiling wanly as she pins her body up against a wall, Emily Fox Kales writes that "Alex's face takes on a smile of gratification as if she has just had an orgasm" (2003: 1633). Whether ravaging each other in passion or in hatred, the characters engage in a similar emotional and physical dynamic.

Water also makes a number of subtle appearances throughout the film's diegesis – Alex cooks Dan's spaghetti in a pot of water (a pot not unlike the one in which the rabbit dies), Dan showers to clean off the traces of Alex from his body, and Alex and Beth share tea when she visits the family's condo. The perseverance of the water motif comes to a head, however, in the film's final sequence, a series that quotes what have already become the film's signature moments and iconic images. The scene begins with a pan across the Gallaghers' foggy yard at dusk and stops at the house, where this time an orange light goes on in an upstairs bedroom. Notably, no one is there to pull a shade down. Dan, dressed in a white shirt and black pants, tucks his daughter into bed, and she too is dressed all in white, with an off-white-colored stuffed pony beside her. Shortly thereafter we see close-up shots of the water Dan runs from the faucet for Beth's tea. As he waits for the water to boil, Dan's oblivion echoes those of earlier scenes where he is not where he should be, as he casually eats one of his daughter's fruit rollups in the living room at the same time that his wife fights for her life upstairs. Because Beth is being terrorized in the bathroom, she does not turn off the faucet and the bathtub overflows, to the point that water, like rain, drips down through the ceiling to the first floor. Again, Dan notices it but does nothing. Only when Dan removes the blaring teapot, whose loud whistles have been drowning out Beth's screams, does he realize what is happening on the floors above him.

The most water-logged image of the film is, of course, Beth's final scene in the all-white bathroom, where she prepares to take a bath. As in *Psycho*, there are multiple close-up shots of running water. As well, the sight of a near-naked woman left alone in the bathroom underscores



The close-ups of faucets and drains in *Fatal Attraction* recall Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

her vulnerability, as does the fact that Beth sports a cast on her already broken wrist. In this steam-filled room, Beth studies her reflection, examining her black eye in the round shaving mirror, and then flips the mirror around to get an even more magnified view, right before Dan enters the bathroom to see if she needs anything. (Here, the close-up of Beth's eye seems to deliberately echo the final shot of Marion's lifeless eye in *Psycho*'s shower sequence.) After Dan has returned downstairs, Beth handles a glass jar, and wipes away steam from the larger bathroom mirror. Suddenly, Alex's face behind her becomes visible, which causes Beth to drop and break the glass. Both women are dressed in white, and this image of Alex as a quiet doppelgänger to Beth is registered in an almost Bergman-like shot of their two faces in the mirror, an image that speaks to Alex's repeated attempts to take Beth's place. Naomi Segal comments on the overlap between the two women here, writing that: "Of course this types the outsider as both intervening on and belonging inside the scheme she ruptures. Beth is potentially the same sort of woman as Alex ..." (1997: 202).

Following the shot of the two women in the mirror together, a cut reveals Alex standing in the doorway to the bathroom holding a knife, the same knife, in fact, that she attacked Dan with in her apartment. She grazes her leg with it, and her blood begins dripping on her feet and the bathroom floor. The knife attack, as Alex and Beth scuffle on the bathroom floor, also echoes Alex's previous attack on Dan in her apartment. The knife eventually goes sliding out of reach across the bathroom floor, as the two women kick and claw each other. Downstairs, Dan finally lifts the teapot, hears the screams, and

summarily drops the teapot, although it appears that the teapot has also burned his hand, such that its heat causes this reaction as much as Beth's distress. Dan then enters the bathroom, slams the back of Alex's head on the mirror that doubled the women, and holds her down underwater in the tub, just as he tried to strangle her earlier in her apartment. In this shot, Alex's eyes pop out, and blood bubbles out from her open mouth. Taken together, the motions of struggle, suffocation, and strangulation suggest that though they are locked in a death battle, the characters' behaviors are also highly reminiscent of the physicalities of sex – these are all, in fact, bodies pushed to the limit.

The effect of this final scene, in fact, is to turn the entire Gallagher home into a watery prison/grave. At one point before the attack Dan enters the bathroom to talk to Beth, but he is shot from a low angle behind the bars of a staircase, an image that clearly invokes that of a prison. Likewise, though Dan deliberately locks the doors to the house, audiences learn later that Alex is already in the house, thus he effectively locks her in, not out. This transfiguration of the ordinary into the deadly haunts the entire sequence, since the innocent drawing of a bath turns into the site of a bloody attack. Even when the ordeal appears to be over, subsequent to Dan's strangulation of her, Alex rises back out of the tub, a specter of the "not dead."¹¹ In *Fatal Attraction*, the bathtub was in actuality a four-foot-deep tub specially built for the set, a fact which explains how Alex's reemergence feels like she has lifted herself out of a coffin. When Alex comes back to life with a great gasp of breath and goes after Dan, Beth, from nowhere, comes into the bathroom, shoots Alex in the chest with a gun, and then Alex slides down the bathroom wall, leaving a bloody trail on the white walls behind her.¹² Though Dan earlier opened the drawer and revealed that the family owned a gun, the fact that Beth is the one to use it symbolically gives Beth the phallus. Though Alex's intensity has been juxtaposed throughout the film with Beth's serenity and composure, in this final scene Beth reveals herself as capable of the same murderous impulses. Her earlier verbal challenge to Alex that she will "kill her" if Alex comes near Beth's family again appeared initially idiosyncratic and unexpected, given the nature of Beth's character. Yet, as this

final sequence confirms, Beth's gruesome promise was not an idle threat. The scene instead identifies Beth as capable of the same atrocities as her nemesis since Beth kills (at least in part) to hang on to an unfaithful husband, which raises the question whether her desperation for domestic security is any different from Alex's.

Alex dies like the bunny, in a bloody, watery grave, and her positioning quotes the dead bunny, as her body submerges and her head tilts over the side of the tub, just as Whitey's did over the side of the boiling pot. Thematically, the fact that Beth is the one who kills Alex, even though Dan mistakenly thinks he has, emphasizes his repeated impotence in the face of Alex's reign of terror. It also underscores the film's centralization of a battle of femininities – despite his efforts, Dan is incapable of blocking Alex's many intrusions. In turn, Dan's paralysis offers a somewhat counterintuitive comment on adultery as a masculinizing act; although it might initially seem like a testament to his virility, its aftermath repeatedly leaves his family open to penetration, and relegates Dan to multiple positions of passivity. The various images and motifs catalogued in this chapter all synergize in service of turning the ordinary into a domestic nightmare, since the film is punctuated by moments where mundane spaces and locales suddenly turn deadly. While we have atomized these various themes and devices for invoking intrusion from a technical perspective, the next chapter examines how these motifs quote and borrow from various American genre formulas. In doing so, it connects the film's domestic explorations, its intense suspense, and its emphasis on graphic sexuality to wider trends in American cinema.