

## *Falling Down* (USA: 1993)

Director: Joel Schumacher

Screenplay: Ebbe Roe Smith

Producers: Arnold Kopelson, Herschel Weingrod & Timothy Harris

Cast: Michael Douglas, Robert Duvall, Barbara Hershey & Rachel Ticotin

There is undoubtedly a tension between entertainment and art, though films can fall under both categories. Social problem pictures usually set out to deal with serious contemporary issues in an entertaining fashion. Consequently, this contemporary flavour helps to sell the film and appeal to those who like thought-provoking cinema, without alienating the core cinema-going audience. On the one hand, we might view films like *Falling Down* as opportunistic in focusing on a contemporary problem in order to make money. On the other, we can consider it as a 'state of the nation' statement. Of course, we can do both.

One of the film's taglines stated the film's premise: 'The adventures of an ordinary man at war with the everyday world'. William Foster/D-FENS (Douglas) is unemployed but he maintains the façade of work by commuting in traffic jams each morning. At the beginning of the film, he 'snaps' and starts walking (a strange occurrence in LA) across the city determined to see his estranged family on his daughter's birthday. As a 'tale of urban reality' (another tagline) he encounters everyday problems that are symptomatic of a sick society.

So what is the film saying? America is a sick society? White patriarchy is in terminal decline (and this must be stopped)? Black and white men have been marginalized by the growth of feminism? America's economic dominance has been badly affected by the Pacific Rim countries?

Well that depends upon how you read the film. The above suggests a reactionary film, promoting a backlash against feminist gains. However, the macho atmosphere of the police station is mocked whilst the Hispanic Sandra is positively represented. *Falling Down* is a film that is open to divergent readings, suggesting it may be an incoherent text.

Sharon Willis suggests the film is misogynist:

Prendergast's wife... figures as the hideous subtext of his reluctant retirement and his ruined reputation... D-FEN's... parallel problem... is his timid, paranoid, deranged mother, locked up in her house with her "glass menagerie." (Willis, 1997, p. 18)

Jude Davies, sees the film as offering a vision of American where White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestants are no longer at home:

Cinematic signifiers of Vietnam abound... As D-FENS walks past the pictures of Vietnam on the outside of the store, the sound of helicopters is heard... [he] is dressed in black combat uniform [which] makes him look more like a Viet Cong soldiers.... When he finally arrives at Venice Beach... buildings are flimsy, the atmosphere is hot. The place is swarming with colour and noise, with exotically dressed, tanned people... D-FENS has arrived in Saigon. (Davis, 1995, pp. 221-2)

While both these commentaries suggest the film is ideologically reactionary, D-FENS is consciously identified with the black protester outside the bank and clearly delineated from the fascist Nick.

In my reading, the film is the equivalent of the UK's national newspaper the *Daily Mail*, though a great deal more entertaining. It is confronting a world where the white male is no longer obviously dominant and this makes it feel uncomfortable. Like the 'lads' mags (which are no longer for 'men who should know better') the film pines for past certainties and inequities.

### Bibliography

Jude Davies (1995) 'Gender, ethnicity and cultural crisis in *Falling Down* and *Groundhog Day*' *Screen* vol.36 No.3, Autumn

Sharon Willis (1997) *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Duke University Press: Durham and London)

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