

“Falling Down and the Failure of Herrenvolk Republicanism”

By Chris Edwards

In *Falling Down*, Joel Schumacher presents the audience with a portrait of one man's failure to reconcile the promises he had internalized regarding the privileges traditionally accorded to men of his social and racial class, and the reality of the modern global capitalist paradigm. With his portrayal of William Foster, Michael Douglas attempts to capture the frustration of an “everyman,” but instead provides a portrait of the slow realization of the loss of a mythical racial and gender currency in the face of late-stage capitalism. Released in 1993, it captured the zeitgeist of racial tension that existed in Los Angeles at the time so well that shooting was halted when the 1992 riots broke out.[1] The figure at the center of *Falling Down* is one of the casualties of a philosophy of the importance and sanctity of white male labor that historian David Roediger refers to as *herrenvolk* republicanism. This belief holds that the labor performed by white men is more valuable to the nation than the labor of other groups.[2] *Falling Down* portrays a vision of what happens when “the centrality and pre-eminence of the white male can no longer be taken for granted.”[3]

As the movie opens, William Foster (referred to by the personalized license plate on his car, D-FENS, in the credits and much of the literature) is stuck in a traffic jam on what appears to be a sweltering Los Angeles day. Surrounding him are his fellow Angelinos; Latinxs, African-Americans, women, children, as well as two men fitting the social stereotype of the Yuppy (cell phones, convertible, conspicuously practicing business). Realizing that his status does not afford him any privilege in the context of the traffic jam, he decides to abandon his car and “go home.”[4] In this same traffic jam sits Robert Duvall's character of Prendergast, an experienced veteran of the L.A.P.D., who is set to retire this very day. Schumacher immediately sets up the juxtaposition of the characters with their differing reactions to the inconvenience of being stuck in a traffic jam. Foster is stressed and agitated, while Prendergast is mildly put out. Prendergast even amuses himself by laughing at humorous graffiti on a billboard. Through the course of the movie both characters will make transformative journeys relative to their status as white heteronormative men.[5]

Foster's first encounter in his odyssey across Los Angeles is with a Korean store-owner, Mr. Lee, who attempts to capitalize on the extreme heat of the day by charging what Foster considers an inflated sum for a can of Coke. As he notes throughout his journey (and as his license plate implies), William Foster was until recently a defense contractor. He takes great pride in informing people that he "helped to protect America." [6] This makes his indignant speech to the business owner rather ironic. By disparaging the attempts of the business owner to maximize his profits, Foster betrays one of the principles of free-market capitalism he spent his life defending. However, Foster is willing to betray this principle because it is ultimately secondary to his fear that he is losing his "normative roles of power." [7] Foster begins by mocking Mr. Lee's English. He then attempts to leverage the amount of military aid the U.S. spends on the Korean peninsula as a means of negotiation. When this fails, he resorts to violence to re-establish his dominance in the marketplace.

His racist treatment of a more recent immigrant attempting to run a successful business in a country that purports to provide them with equal access to the American financial system betrays his true feelings towards American society. The scene in Mr. Lee's store comments on the tension that had been building between the Korean and African-American communities in 1990's Los Angeles over the shooting of a young African-American girl, Latasha Harlins, by a Korean store-owner, Soon Ja Du, in 1991. Harlins' death was credited with being one of the sparks that ignited the L.A. Riots. Edward J. Park, a professor of Asian American Studies at Loyola Marymount University, argues that the killing "made it absolutely clear that Korean Americans are not spectators to the unfolding American racial drama, nor bystanders, they were now intimately and inextricably implicated." [8] Ebbe Roe Smith says that the shooting was a factor in his writing of the scene. [9]

Foster's status as a stranger trespassing on land he thought he was entitled to is reinforced by his next encounter. As he sits repairing his shoe and drinking his beverage, Foster is approached by two Latinx gang members who inform him that he is on their land. This leads to him noting that their signs are incomprehensible because they are not in "fucking English". Tensions escalate to the point that they attempt to steal his briefcase, and he beats them back with a bat he had stolen from the store-owner in the previous scene. Again, there is an irony that is later revealed that the briefcase is empty except for an un-touched lunch suggesting that the briefcase is more important to Foster as a totem of his role as White-Male-Defense-Contractor rather than having any practical worth. The gang members return to extract revenge for their humiliation by performing a drive-by on Foster as he uses an area pay-phone. This attempt fails, and the gangsters manage to shoot everybody around

Foster, yet he escapes unscathed. The gangsters crash into a parked car in their attempt to escape. Foster approaches the car to deliver a verbal rebuke and takes their bag of guns.

Freshly armed, Foster enters a fast food restaurant to order breakfast, but he is a few minutes late and the clerk refuses his order. Foster responds in a socially normative fashion and asks to speak to the manager. The manager also refuses his request, but in an extremely condescending manner that leads Foster to issue another snarky statement, pull a pistol and fire some shots into the ceiling of the restaurant. At this point in the narrative, he is still trying to maintain a veneer of middle-class, white, male privilege and control. This desire leads him to try to calm the rest of the patrons and convince them of the reasonableness of his position. He changes his mind about breakfast and orders a burger, but the disparity between the actual burger and the Platonic-ideal of a burger that is displayed on the menu board sets him off again.

Foster's shoes need repair at this point, so he enters a military surplus store seeking to replace them. The owner of the store has been listening to reports of Foster's exploits on the radio. When Prendergast's partner enters the store looking for Foster, he conceals Foster's presence from her. The store owner helps Foster because he is a white-supremacist and believes he and Foster are kindred spirits. Up until this point, Foster's violence has been symbolic or impotent: he attempts to blow up a piece of heavy construction equipment, but he misfires the rocket launcher. He fires and displays his pistol in the fast-food place, but no one is hurt in the end. The one instance in which Foster consciously murders a person, it is the owner of the military surplus store. In her review for *The Threepenny Review*, Carol Clover notes that he "secures a position we might otherwise ascribe to D-Fens, whose words and deeds some might construe as too close to fascism for comfort." [10] Nick offends Foster by explicitly acknowledging a belief that Foster has internalized, that the white supremacy that they believe to be their right is under threat by what they would call "political correctness", a term that serves to delegitimize calls for sensitivity to paradigms other than white, cis-het, Christian, maleness. When Foster protests that he and Nick are not alike, Nick threatens to sodomize Foster and further deprive him of his sense of *herrenvolk* masculinity.

Foster emerges from the surplus store clad in all black tactical fatigues. He has shed his white shirt and tie, a uniform of white, middle-class masculinity that he shares with Prendergast and has allowed Prendergast to identify (with) Foster and track him on his odyssey. From here his interactions become shorter and include an aggressive panhandler, road workers milking the city clock, and an elitist member of a country club whom he frightens into a heart

attack and then denies him his drugs. When he comes across the estate of a plastic surgeon whose caretaker's family is using their employer's backyard grill, Foster briefly takes the family hostage. Lamenting his failure to achieve the level of wealth that surrounds him, he delivers a monologue bemoaning his loss of privilege in the labor market saying "I lost my job. Actually, I didn't lose it, it lost me." [11]

Throughout the narrative, we are offered glimpses into the life of Prendergast as a contrast. Liam Kennedy calls him "a model of 'weak' (feminized) masculinity, deskbound and about to retire because his wife emotionally dominates and manipulates him." [12] His boss, who holds his sports and military *bona fides* out for conspicuous display, holds him in obvious disdain and barely makes the effort to convince him to stay on. When the Korean store-owner is brought in to give a report on Foster's behavior in his store, he asks why his Japanese colleague can't handle the report. Prendergast is also losing his status in the *herrenvolk* republic, but it doesn't bother him due to his de-masculinized status. Davies notes that while Prendergast's acceptance of "political correctness" is meant as a "gesture towards multiculturalism," it ultimately serves to "restabilize the cultural centrality of white males." [13] While Foster's gender status declines throughout the film (his wife has left him and he lives with his mother,) Prendergast's ascends, as he reasserts his dominance over his wife and tells his boss to "fuck off".

The movie concludes with a dramatic scene at the end of the Venice Pier that culminates with a confrontation between Foster and Prendergast. Foster seeks Prendergast's validation as a fellow white male for the actions he has taken. Ultimately, Foster realizes that his life insurance policy is worth more than his future labor, and the only action that will allow him to fulfill his obligation as the head of a republican household to provide for his wife and child is to provoke Prendergast into shooting him. He does this by suddenly pulling his daughters water pistol on Prendergast who has mistakenly assumed Foster to still be armed. The movie ends with a sudden renewal of Prendergast's masculinity and him revealing that he is defying his wife and staying on the force.

In an interview with Jay Carr, A film critic for the Boston Globe, shortly after the movie came out in 1993, director Joel Schumacher stated that "The city doesn't belong to Michael (Douglas)'s character anymore," and "Michael is like this defense worker who bought the whole nine yards. He's living in a world that doesn't exist anymore." [14] Despite comparisons to "Death Wish," [15] another paean to the rage of the white man, Schumacher explicitly rejected the comparison because he felt that Foster isn't consciously looking

for revenge. He instead wanted to create a film expressing black rage at American society, but focused on white disenfranchisement.[16] In 2018, writer Ebbe Roe Smith said Foster “was surprised” by his loss of status in a way that he “wouldn’t be today.” Smith believes that the Foster of today would have already processed this information and would be acting on it.[17] With the rise of the men’s rights movement and white grievance politics in political discourse, Foster was a harbinger of things to come. Joel Schumacher attempted to create a Blaxploitation film for middle class white men and in doing so explored a remnant of how *herrenvolk* republican ideals prevalent in earlier generations manage to maintain a hold on our modern psyche.

Endnotes

1 Ebbe Roe Smith, Interview by Steve Chiotakis. *Press Play with Madeleine Brand*. KCRW, Los Angeles, March 8, 2018.

2 David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York, New York: 2007. 84.

3 Jude Davies, “I’m the Bad Guy?’ *Falling Down* and White Masculinity in 1990s Hollywood.” *Journal of Gender Studies* Vol. 4, No. 2, (1995), 148.

4 *Falling Down*. Directed by Joel Schumacher. Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures et al., 1993.

5 Jude Davies, “I’m The Bad Guy?” , 147.

6 *Falling Down*, Schumacher.

7 Liam Kennedy, “Alien Nation: White Male Paranoia and Imperial Culture in the United States.” *The Journal of American Studies* Vol. 30 No. 1, The American Past and Popular Culture (Apr. 1996), 89.

8 Angel Jennings, “How the killing of Latasha Harlins changed South L.A., long before Black Lives Matter” *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 2016, California.

9 Chiotakis, *Press Play*, 2018.

10 Carol J. Clover, “Falling Down and the Culture of Complaint.” *The Threepenny Review* No. 54 (Summer, 1993), 33.

11 *Falling Down*, Schumacher.

12 Kennedy, "Alien Nation", 98.

13 Davies, "I'm the Bad Guy?", 149.

14 Jay Carr, "An Unlikely Voice of Rage: Joel Schumacher Talks About 'Falling Down.'", *Boston Globe* February 21, 1993, sec. B35.

15 John Simon, "Falling Down." *National Review*, 45.9 May 10, 1993, 52+.

16 Carr, "An Unlikely Voice of Rage", B35.

17 Chiotakis, *Press Play*, 2018.

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