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Fair Play

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Fair Play* (2023), directed by Chloe Domont.

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Author Notes

Chris Deacy is Reader in Theology and Religious Studies and former Head of Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. His PhD (University of Wales, 1999) was in the area of redemption and film, and Chris has published monographs which include *Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred* (Oxford University Press, 2016); *Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film* (Routledge, 2012); and *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (University of Wales Press, 2001). Chris also writes regular film reviews, is writing a book about nostalgia and religion and has been hosting a podcast since 2018 called *Nostalgia Interviews with Chris Deacy* - <https://audioboom.com/channels/4956567>



Fair Play (2023), dir. Chloe Domont

Fair Play works as an updating of the kind of sexual and workplace office politics thrillers of the 90s, in the vein of *Disclosure*, but with a gender twist in that here the focus is on the life of a young woman who impresses the management in the finance company where she works in New York to the extent that she gets catapulted to the top job. Her new fiancé was the favorite to get the coveted promotion, and what follows is a chronic blurring of the boundaries between the workplace and the domestic sphere, with violence, sex, kink and jealousy all coalescing as the male in the partnership realizes that he needs to find a way to break even.

When the film begins, at a family wedding, Luke (Alen Ehrenreich) and Emily (Phoebe Dynevor) are all over one another, unable to take their hands off each other and caressing one another in the most intimate of places. They work together, but no one knows of their relationship (which in any case their firm would prohibit), and once Emily is promoted Luke no longer wants to have sex with a woman who is more powerful and successful than he is. While implicitly

applauding Emily on her promotion, his jealousy is all-consuming, and Luke sets out to sabotage Emily's new standing as her company's PM, giving her financial advice which turns out to cost the company \$25 million. A battle of the wills now takes place, whereby she has to decide whether to lean on her partner's advice or go with her own riskier-sounding initiatives, and whichever way she plays it, it is going to be injurious.

Fair Play does a formidable job of never quite letting us work out how this updated battle-of-the-sexes dynamic is going to resolve, and British actor and Mike Leigh regular Eddie Marsan is chilling as the boss of the company who enjoys engendering fear into his employees, letting it slip here or there that a particular employee is not up to the job, and diminishing them to the point that they will likely quit or be sacked. What works is that the screenplay keeps us guessing as to whether Luke will triumph over Emily or she over him, or whether they will realign and find that their violent games have reset their relationship back to where it once was—or, whether they will grow apart even further, leading to a fight to the bitter end.

Some might liken this film to *Fatal Attraction*, in which the denouement leads the combatants to go head to head in a battle of the wills—to the death. These are characters who are defined by power and prestige, and their commodities-for-sale in the workplace are matched by the degree to which they will trade their bodies and dignity. Ultimately, this is a movie with a caustic understanding of interpersonal relationships, where the only way to advance is to demolish and demonize the Other, and *Fair Play* suggests that we haven't come very far since the days of those Michael Douglas thrillers of the 80s and 90s. This is human nature played out at its most venal, and this cautionary thriller works well as a parable of any age where money equals power.