

6. ART CINEMA AND MURDEROUS LESBIANS

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The New Queer Wave in cinema has featured notoriously few women filmmakers or films about lesbians.¹ Although some critics have included independent films and videos by women and some lesbian films were even quite successful, they have remained marginal in the critical work on New Queer Cinema.² This marginality is all the more conspicuous when compared to the critical attention devoted to lesbian chic in mainstream cinema.³ In between these two poles of independent lesbian filmmaking and Hollywood lesbian flicks surged an unexpected small wave of art films in the mid-1990s featuring young lesbian couples who seal their affections for each other in blood: *Sister My Sister*, *La Cérémonie*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Fun* and *Butterfly Kiss*.⁴

It is not easy to situate these five films *vis-à-vis* New Queer Cinema. If gay authorship is to be taken as a defining characteristic of New Queer Cinema, then the films certainly do not fit into the category of NQC because – to my knowledge – the directors are not gay; the films were certainly not promoted as queer in any way by the filmmakers or producers. Yet, the films partake in the popularisation of queer images and themes and could therefore be seen to be a product of NQC. They can be characterised as art movies with popular appeal and as queer products of straight directors simultaneously. This may raise the question how close these art films are then to New Queer Cinema. Although the films do not raise concerns about the commercialisation of queer images, as the films of NQC did, they do cause worries about the perpetuation of old stereotypes, *in casu* the stereotype of the murderous lesbian. In this chapter I will argue that this stereotype is deconstructed rather than reinforced. In the second half of the chapter I will discuss the disturbing association of lesbian sexuality with madness and violence in more depth,

in order to analyse the representation of stereotypes and position the films in relation to NQC. I will do so within the context of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory for reasons that will become apparent later. But first I will introduce the narrative and visual pleasures of the five films.

DÉLIRE À DEUX

The films display a striking thematic and structural unity in its queer subject matter, focusing on the intense relationship between two girls or young women. A passionate love that leads to 'ceremonial killings' (as I will argue later); the sacrifice of the mother or a maternal figure on the altar of lesbian love.

Sister My Sister (UK 1994) is the only film made by women: directed by Nancy Meckler and written by Wendy Kesselman (based on her play *My Sister In This House* from 1981). It tells the 'true story' of two domestic servants, the sisters Christine and Léa Papin, who savagely killed their mistress and her daughter in a French provincial town in the 1930s.⁵ The French film *La Cérémonie* tells a similar story (Claude Chabrol, Fr/Ger, 1995; based on the novel *A Judgement in Stone* by Ruth Rendell). Sophie is hired as a domestic servant to Madame Lelièvre in her remote mansion in the countryside. The introverted and illiterate Sophie befriends the volatile Jeanne. Together they shoot Madame Lelièvre and her husband and two children. *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, NZ, 1994) is set in the 1950s in a provincial town in New Zealand. Like *Sister My Sister*, the story is based on a historical case: of Juliet Hulme and Pauline Parker who killed Pauline's mother when the friends were threatened to be separated. *Fun* (Rafael Zelinski, US/Canada, 1994) is not based on historical material, at least not more than that the film is loosely inspired by a sentence from a diary in a Californian murder case: 'Today we ran away and killed an old lady. It was lots of fun'. That is how Bonnie and Hilary finish a delirious day they have spent together. *Butterfly Kiss* (Michael Winterbottom, UK, 1994) differs from the other four films in that the friends Eunice (Eu, 'you') and Miriam (Mi, 'me') mainly kill men after the initial murder of a woman. Eunice is also the only serial killer of all these female characters.

In narrative structure and aesthetic imagery there are striking analogies between the films. The films based on historical matter, *Sister My Sister* and *Heavenly Creatures*, both start with a flashback of the murder, after which the story of a lesbian love relation unfolds. In contrast to *Sister My Sister* where the murder is filmed in slow motion, in the dark and by rapid montage, the murder in *Heavenly Creatures* is filmed hyperrealistically. In both cases the slaying is physically heavy and literally bloody work; passions exploding into a frenzied *délire à deux*.

The colourful luminosity of *La Cérémonie* shrilly contrasts with the dark imagery of *Sister My Sister*. The films are quite similar, however, in their psychological finesse and the reconstruction of seemingly meaningless details

that acutely express the oppression and humiliation of the lower-class women and takes the stories to their macabre endings. *Heavenly Creatures* and *Fun* show remarkably similar imagery in the cinematic style. The filmmakers have looked for effects in colour and camera work to represent the unbridled energy of the adolescent girls up to the point of delirium. Finally, in *Fun* and *Butterfly Kiss* the stories are told in flashback structure by the surviving friend in prison, Hilary and Miriam respectively. Those scenes are filmed in black and white, while the love-and-murder story is filmed in colour.

Against the stereotype of the dangerous lesbian who is inevitably killed in Hollywood cinema as revenge or punishment,⁶ the girls mostly survive the carnage. This does not necessarily bring the films closer to some of the more cheerful stories that came out of New Queer Cinema because the girls end up in prison or an asylum. When they die it is at their own hands. Bonnie commits suicide when she is separated from Hilary in prison. In *Butterfly Kiss* Eunice asks Miriam for the ultimate gesture of love and dedication in her desire for divine punishment and redemption: she wants to be killed by her. In a magical scene Miriam drowns Eunice in the sea – and we cannot tell whether it is suicide, murder or baptism.

EXCESS

The notion of excess may point to the way in which these films can be read as 'queer'. As Michele Aaron has convincingly argued, the films are a multi-genre mix of '[b]uddy movie, erotic thriller and lesbian love story . . . invested with the politics of documentary'.⁷ I want to add that the films draw heavily upon art cinema aesthetics in their general foregrounding of cinematic means: superb acting by outstanding (mostly European) actresses, creative camera work, beautiful imagery and original scripts with a tendency for the gothic. The main attraction of the films, for this spectator at least, lies in the uncompromising passion of the girls. They are fascinating characters in their transgressive behaviour, carried away in the maelstrom of their passions. Admittedly, some of the women are bordering on the insane, but the films work to understand their complex psychic life rather than reject or despise them.

More importantly, narrative and visual pleasure never functions at the expense of the female characters, even in the love scenes – conventionally a set-up for erotic titillation of the (male) spectator. This kind of voyeuristic pleasure is denied in the films. We do see naked bodies, and we watch female bodies making love to one another, but the cinematic style privileges the depth of feeling and the excess of passion rather than the cheap thrills of sleazy sex. Also, the women are not conventionally beautiful according to Hollywood standards. Visual pleasure in these films lies elsewhere. The excess of the deep-felt emotions is visualised in a refined aesthetic style or cinematic spectacle. The first can be found in the desolate beauty of *Sister My Sister*, *La Cérémonie*

and *Butterfly Kiss*; the latter in the colourful and vertiginous imagery of *Fun* and *Heavenly Creatures*. The films make the excess, whether in fantasy, emotion or sexuality, physically poignant, psychologically rich and visually spectacular.

The narrative point of view lies unambiguously with the female characters. Because the stories of the art films are told from the girls' perspective, the spectator aligns her sympathy with them. The films project a spectating position of identification with the female characters. We follow the girls' dreams, hopes, desires as well as their fears, nightmares, and pain. The female perspective can also be traced in the complex relation of the girls to the mother or mother substitute, a figure all too often neglected in our culture. Probably most spectators are put off by the carnage, but until then the films have produced an understanding if not sympathy for the intense inner lives of the female characters. By giving them full narrative and visual perspective, the films get across the complexity and vicissitudes of female identity and lesbian desire in a repressive society.

Bursting with life, overflowing with passions, alive with creativity, the women produce their own imaginative worlds. The key term here is, once again, excess. Actively desiring, refusing to be desired in heterosexual terms, transgressing the boundaries of their class and gender, the women's bodies become the site of struggle. Continually on the verge of exhilarated and often painful love and passion, and full of anger, the women resist 'established gender and sexuality categories'⁸ and transgress into homoeroticism (*Fun* and *La Cérémonie*), explicit lesbianism (the other three films), or even into heterosexual sex (*Heavenly Creatures*, *Butterfly Kiss*), incest (*Sister My Sister*) and sadomasochism (*Butterfly Kiss*). 'Queer' indeed.

QUEER PARADOXES

Sister My Sister, *La Cérémonie*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Fun* and *Butterfly Kiss* maintain the queer paradox that the female characters are not only 'heavenly creatures' but also dangerous misfits. To the gay spectator these are perturbing films because they connect adolescent female bodies and violence, lesbian desire and pathology, same-sex love and bloodthirstiness. A stereotypical image all too familiar from Hollywood movies, even more recent ones such as *Thelma and Louise*, *Basic Instinct* and *Bound*.⁹ The burning question here is whether the films perpetuate the stereotype of the man-hating and murderous lesbian.

As Aaron has pointed out: 'So strong is the connection between woman's deviant or independent sexuality . . . and her deadliness, that it haunts all representations of strong women or of strong relationships between women'.¹⁰ This is undoubtedly true and it is also true that in this sense the art films do little to counter the traditional stereotype lurking in the shady background. However, some redeeming factors make me consider the art

films as *not* yet another repetition of the same old story. It seems to me that the films work against rather than with the stereotype of the dangerous lesbian. In that respect, the films are certainly closer to the work of lesbian and gay filmmakers within New Queer Cinema than to the lesbian chic of Hollywood movies.

Part of my argument has already been suggested above: the sustained visual and narrative perspective of the female characters, the intensity of the committed relationships between them, and the artistic aesthetics privileging excess and ecstasy. For these reasons I feel about those films (with maybe the exception of the sombre *Butterfly Kiss*) as Aaron about the queer film *Swoon*: 'Intoxicated by the beauty and the rarity of the image of *Swoon*'s lovers, one almost forgives, or rather forgets, their crime'.¹¹ Thus, the films' seductive powers invite an appreciation of moving and daring lesbian loves. As I have argued elsewhere, the question in queer cinema is not simply to get rid of stereotypes (as they are quite resilient), nor how to replace them with positive images (which leave the heterosexist imperative intact), but rather to achieve complexity and diversity.¹² I would like to point to a paradox here. Where New Queer Cinema has perhaps remained too close to the project of positive images in, for example, the lesbian romances like *Bar Girls*, *When Night Is Falling*, *Thin Ice*, *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* and *Gazon Maudit* that came in its wake, these 'queer' art films have accomplished unsurpassed levels of complexity.

The other part of my argument lies in the nature of the killings. I want to argue that the killings are ceremonial rather than lustful. First of all, the killings lack the most important ingredient for the stereotype of the dangerous lesbian, and that is a *femme fatale*. Not only is the *femme fatale* conspicuously absent from the films I'm discussing here; so are men. The 'thrilling threat' of the dangerous lesbian is usually directed at men in the form of devastatingly beautiful women; their beauty defined in purely heterosexual terms.¹³ Catherine Trammell in *Basic Instinct* is the perfect example of such a female figure. Second, the killings are not immediately connected to sexuality or to a sexual act, countering the intricate intimacy between sex and death in most Hollywood movies. Except for *Butterfly Kiss* the women don't 'fuck and kill'.

This is not to say that the killings are devoid of passion; they are excessively passionate. I would even go as far as to say that they are like a *crime passionnel*. This suggests that love is involved, or rather a love-hate relationship. If we look at the people who are killed by the girls, this may become more obvious. Again, *Butterfly Kiss* is the exception here. The other girls mainly kill somebody they know well: the mother in *Heavenly Creatures*, the mistress and her family (with whom the girls live in the same house) in *Sister My Sister* and *La Cérémonie*. In *Fun* the girls kill somebody they haven't met before; an older woman who is explicitly portrayed and positioned as a grandmother. The women may be psychologically unstable, but they are not criminals who are likely to repeat their murderous acts. That would not fit

with the nature of a *crime passionnel*. In order to understand the cinematic representation of these killings, and make a further case for the deconstruction of the stereotype of the murderous lesbian, I will make a theoretical excursion into Lacanian psychoanalysis.

MIRRORS

Lacan took a great deal of interest in the crime of the sisters Papin and based part of his later reflections on the mirror phase on this case,¹⁴ a concept which had a great influence on film theory.¹⁵ In his early practice and perhaps all his life Lacan was fascinated by women who had committed a crime, especially by what he saw as the paranoid female criminal.¹⁶ According to him, the paranoid structure means that the female criminal sees her mirror image reflected in her victim. Thus, the sisters Papin hated in their employers – mother and daughter – their own projected suffering. Lynda Hart points out that Lacan thought to observe a secret in female criminals: 'the danger of too much closeness'.¹⁷ This proximity between two women is related to a notion of perfect love. It can have disastrous consequences and explode in aggression when the subjects are forced to allow the outside world into the relation or when they are forced to separate. Lacan attributes an 'erotomaniac' component to this kind of paranoia, consisting of repressed homosexuality.

The sisters Papin did cherish a homosexual love for each other, which points to a strong element of narcissism in that love. Lacan writes: 'But, it seems that between them the sisters were even unable to take the necessary distance to hurt the other. True Siamese souls, they formed a world that remained forever closed'.¹⁸ Cathérine Clément argues that on the basis of this kind of case – the female paranoid criminal with repressed homosexuality – Lacan concluded that the 'correct distance is the opposite of the feminine'.¹⁹ This implies that only the male subject can approximate the correct distance. Without the intervention of a third term, the male other, the two women are frightening *Doppelgänger*, copies of one single self.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis the mirror phase is the psychic phenomenon in which that 'correct distance' is established for the subject. This is the moment at which the young child begins to form an identity. The mirror phase is situated within the Imaginary, more or less between six and eighteen months of the earliest years in childhood. In Lacan's view, the child's first steps on its way to the formation of an identity are based on a 'misrecognition' (*méconnaissance*). This means that the child observes its body in the mirror – usually in its mother's arms – as an autonomous and complete unity, while the child does not yet control its own body and does not yet experience itself as a separate entity from the mother.

The newly acquired identity is, however, based on an optical illusion because the child 'misrecognises' itself as an autonomous whole. It identifies with the imago of its own body, an image which is all the more idealised

because it holds a promise of control that the child does not yet experience in its own helpless body. The first identification is therefore already an alienation in which the child learns to identify (with) itself as an other, as well as through an other.

The process of the formation of the self during the mirror stage forms the basis for all later identifications. For Lacan each identification is therefore structurally imaginary, that is to say it is based on fictive imagos. This is where the relation to cinema can be made, because in cinema the spectator's identification is effectuated through imagos; through visual imagery. The subject's identity lies always under threat as it is dependent on a fundamental misrecognition within the mirror stage; identity is built upon a fiction, an imago. The Imaginary is not so much a stage, as a psychic register that remains influential throughout adulthood, especially in love relations.²⁰ Hence, the importance of visual representations like cinema in offering continuing opportunities for ideal yet imaginary identifications.

The identity of the self is in fact an identification with the other who is incorporated within the illusion of autonomy. Where there is a self, there is also an other. The fact that in the first instance this other usually is the mother or the maternal figure, is meaningful in the context of the films which I discuss in this chapter. However, the boundaries between self and other are still confused in the mirror stage. Because the child learns to identify as an other through the idealised mirror image, the distance between self and other is as fictional and imaginary as one's own identity. That distance, 'the correct distance', is a precarious balance which can be undone any moment. The subject has to continually play acrobatics in order to guard that boundary. Loss of the boundary between self and other will swallow up the subject.

Although narcissism is a necessary psychic structure for human well-being, narcissism easily connotes an infantile and diseased personality. It is quite telling that in Western culture narcissism has been intimately connected to a female subject position. To this almost automatic linking of women and narcissism, lesbianism is all too often added, and vice versa lesbian eroticism is all too often coupled with narcissism. However, it may be opportune to recall that the narcissistic structure of the mirror stage forms the foundation for all love relations, not only for homosexual love relations.

On the basis of the inseparability and the 'dangerous' closeness of the sisters Papin, Lacan theorised a psychical structure which he later conceptualised in the mirror stage. For Lacan the same-sex love between women equals the loss of boundary between self and other. Self and other are inextricably bound in a bond that will inevitably explode in violence when the 'law of the Father' intervenes and draws the boundaries between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. In this way Lacan unequivocally renders lesbian desire as the source of criminality and madness in women.

THE M/OTHER

The concept of the mirror stage may help to understand the love and violence of the girl characters in *Sister My Sister*, *La Cérémonie*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Fun* and *Butterfly Kiss*. In these films there is definitely a high level of identification between the girls. Their physical friendship and love even completely exclude others. Although the boundary between self and other acquires vague contours within the friendship, the boundary with the outside world, on the contrary, is very sharply drawn. The girls do not allow the Other within their friendship and thus place themselves outside the Symbolic order. Yet, their friendship cannot be understood as a complete symbiosis because the girls feel desire for one another. And desire requires a distance between self and other. The girls move back and forth between identification (the wish to *be* the other) and sexual desire (the wish to *have* the other).²¹

This difference is hardly noticed by Lacan. In his theory he is so blinded by sexual difference between men and women that he is unable to recognise differences among women. Because the films fully represent the eroticism between the girls, the focus there is rather on desire than on identification and thus the difference among the female friends is not denied. In this context it is interesting that Aaron has noted that the girls in the films are visually contrasted: '[o]ne of the pair might be darker or taller, or they might also come from different classes as in *Heavenly Creatures*. Somehow they are pitted against each other'.²² For Aaron the visual contrast is a way in which 'lesbianism is being heterosexualised by the play upon the pairs' visual and enduring differences'.²³ To me, however, these differences point precisely to a representation of active lesbian desire.

In all the five films the girls commit a murder when a forced separation is threatening or actually happening. In most films this is made explicitly clear. Even in *Butterfly Kiss* the story suggests that Eunice starts to kill after she has lost the only woman (Judith) who loved her. This characteristic, the explosion of violence when the friends' inseparability is threatened, corresponds to Lacan's observations about violent female patients. If we consider the object of the girls' violence, it is striking that the victims are by no means arbitrary. The victim in *Fun* may appear to be arbitrarily chosen, but the killed woman is an old, sweet, granny-like lady. Just before the murder Hilary and Bonnie express their disgust at the display of family portraits of children and grandchildren on the wall. In *Heavenly Creatures*, *Sister My Sister* and *Fun* the girls commit a matricide: they kill the mother or a mother figure. In *La Cérémonie* the women kill not only the mother but her whole family. Only in *Butterfly Kiss* is the violence mainly directed at men.²⁴

As mentioned above, the girls do not allow others into their friendship. The friendship can be understood as the symbolic refusal to allow a third party into their mirroring relation. In other words, the girls refuse to enter an oedipal triangle. This still begs the question why the girls kill the mother or a

mother substitute rather than the father or a father substitute. In some cases they have good reasons for patricide (in *Sister My Sister*, *Fun* and *La Cérémonie* there are suggestions of sexual abuse in early years by the father; in the last film it is even suggested that Sophie has actually killed her father). I think that the reason for the killing of the maternal figure can be found in the nature of the friendship of these girls.

In their relationship the girls adhere more meaning to the Imaginary than to the Symbolic. The narcissistic identification and the great role of fantasy both point to the primary function of the Imaginary. In this context it is important to realise that it is the mother who is the first person to be experienced and known as the other. The mirror stage is therefore one of the first conscious moments in which the I separates from the m/other. Thus, this is the moment which starts off the slow and painful process of breaking out of the symbiotic relation with the mother who is the first love object for the child. When at a later stage in life the threat of a second traumatic separation dawns, breaking off the intense and loving friendship with another girl, deep fear and pain of the initial trauma are awakened, that is the repudiation of the first love object. This is perhaps the reason why the girls direct their fury at the maternal body. The mother does not only stand for the symbolic order that breaks into the imaginary world of the girls, but also recalls the early trauma. A repetition of the trauma must be avoided at all pains. For the inseparable friends a permanent separation is unimaginable and must be averted by a ceremonial killing. The mother is the victim who has to be ceremonially offered on the altar of love between the girls.

There may be another motive at play as well. Lacan saw the sisters Papin as doubles with a shared ego-ideal. The ego-ideal is founded upon female figures within the unconscious. These are ambivalent imagos that may call forth hate as well as love within the mirroring relation of the Imaginary. In the films the girls reject this female ego-ideal. Whether it is because they belong to a lower class and hate the bourgeois ideal of femininity, or because of sexual abuse by the father, or because their repressed lesbian desires can find no outlet in society, the girls all refuse the heterosexual model of womanhood and its related role of mother and housewife. For them, the ideal is in fact an ordeal and the mother represents precisely that which they do not wish to become. The matricide can thus be read as a symbolic murder of traditional femininity and of the patriarchal family.

TRANSGRESSION

It is time to return to the question how *Sister My Sister*, *La Cérémonie*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Fun* and *Butterfly Kiss* can be situated vis-à-vis New Queer Cinema. In my view, the small *hausse* in independent films embracing lesbianism in the context of violence and murder is part of the proliferation of queer images and themes within the mainstream in the 1990s. The films may

be read as 'queer', but they are not part of New Queer Cinema. New Queer Cinema has brought along a certain popularisation of queerness in mainstream cinema. Not that I am necessarily against popularisation; the more images of gay and lesbian characters, stories and themes, the better. Invisibility is the greatest enemy for any marginalised social group.

A 'queer' film is generally understood to 'challenge or transgress established straight or gay and lesbian understandings of gender and sexuality'.²⁵ Sometimes I have the impression that queer politics have underestimated what it means to seriously challenge or transgress categories of gender and sexuality. Such transgressions, as we can witness in *Sister My Sister*, *La Cérémonie*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Fun* and *Butterfly Kiss*, come necessarily with bewilderment, disorder and pain. Thus, the films that I have discussed in this chapter may well interrogate some of the celebratory aspects of New Queer Cinema. To deny the workings of the unconscious and to simply wish for a celebration of queerness seems to me a hopelessly idealistic and therefore unrealistic project. A Lacanian reading, as I have offered above and corrected for its normative readings of lesbian subjectivity, may not only point to a deconstruction of the stereotype of the murderous lesbian, but more importantly, may also help to understand the confusion and grief involved in processes of queer subjectivity and sexuality. As such, the art films may actually be a step beyond the mere positivity of some of the films in New Queer Cinema. This does not solve, however, the painful issue of stereotyping. I am not advocating an easy embracement of the films I discussed in this chapter, because the stereotype of the murderous lesbian is too vicious and enduring. The films move between the Scylla of perpetual stereotypes and the Charybdis of positive images, in deconstructing the very stereotypes they evoke. Given that they diverge widely from the slick representation of lesbian murderous chic in Hollywood movies, and that New Queer Cinema has given us a wide range of pleasing self-representations, maybe these art films can function to present us with passionate yet perturbing images of lesbian love. Such is the paradox of queer transgression.

NOTES

- 1 See B. Ruby Rich, 'New Queer Cinema', *Sight and Sound* 2:5 (September 1992), reprinted in this book.
- 2 See Martha Gever, John Greyson and Pratibha Parmar (eds), *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- 3 See, for example, the collections of Laura Doan (ed.), *The Lesbian Postmodern* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge (eds), *The Good, the Bad and the Gorgeous: Popular Culture's Romance with Lesbianism* (London: Pandora, 1994); and Tamsin Wilton (ed.), *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- 4 It is surprising that these films met with much more critical attention than lesbian romantic comedies released in the same period, such as *Go Fish* (Rose Troche, 1994), *Bar Girls* (Marita Giovanni, 1994), *When Night Is Falling* (Patricia Rozema,

- 1995), *Thin Ice* (Fiona Cunningham-Reid, 1995), *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (Maria Maggentie, 1995), *Gazon Maudit* (Josianna Balasko, aka *Bushwhacked* or *French Twist*, 1995), and *Love and Other Catastrophes* (Emma-Kate Croghan, 1996). In 1995 Jackie Stacey could still complain that *Desert Hearts* (Donna Deitch, 1985) had no followers, but the above list suggests that this genre is by now fairly established, still in vogue with later additions such as *Chutney Popcorn* (Nisha Ganatra, 1999). See Stacey, '“If You Don't Play, You Can't Win”: *Desert Hearts* and the Lesbian Romance Film', in Wilton, *Immortal*, pp. 92–114.
- 5 For many decades to come French intellectuals would spill their ink over this crime. The story inspired Jean Genet to write his famous play *The Maids*. Anarchists saw in the sisters Papin 'the angels of the revolution'. Existentialists de Beauvoir and Sartre understood this crime as the uprising of the labourers against the bourgeoisie. de Beauvoir also saw it as the rebellion of female servants against maternal authority. Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan analysed the murder as 'paranoia caused by repressed lesbian desires' ('Motifs du crime paranoïaque: le crime des sœurs Papin', in *de la Psychose: paranoïaque et ses rapports avec la personnalité. Suivi de premiers écrits sur la paranoïa* [Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1975], pp. 389–98). Later in this chapter I will discuss his well-known theory of the mirror phase which is said to be founded on this case. More recently the Papin case became subject of feminist reflection: see Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1994); and C. Lane, '“The Delirium of Interpretation”: Writing the Papin Affair', *Differences*, 5:2 (1993): 24–61; and Nicole Jouve-Ward, 'An Eye for an Eye: The Case of the Papin Sisters', in Helen Birch (ed.), *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 7–31.
- 6 See Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Closet* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).
- 7 Michele Aaron, 'Til Death Us Do Part: Cinema's Queer Couples Who Kill', in Michele Aaron (ed.), *The Body's Perilous Pleasures: Dangerous Desires and Contemporary Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 77.
- 8 Alexander Doty, 'Queer Theory', in John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 150.
- 9 See Cathy Griggers, 'Phantom and Reel Projections: Lesbians and the (Serial) Killing-Machine', in Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (eds), *Posthuman Bodies*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 162–76; Christine Holmland, 'A Decade of Deadly Dolls: Hollywood and the Woman Killer', in Birch, *Moving*, pp. 127–51; R. C. Hoogland, *Lesbian Configurations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997); Deborah Jermyn, 'Rereading the Bitches from Hell: A Feminist Appropriation of the Female Psychopath', *Screen*, 37: 3 (1996): 251–67; Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993) and Lee Wallace, 'Continuous Sex: The Editing of Homosexuality in *Bound and Rope*', *Screen*, 41:4 (2000): 369–87.
- 10 Aaron, 'Death', p. 74.
- 11 Ibid., p. 68.
- 12 See Anneke Smelik, 'Gay and Lesbian Criticism', in Hill and Gibson, *Oxford Guide*, pp. 135–47.
- 13 Aaron, 'Death', p. 69.
- 14 See Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I', in *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Norton, 1966), pp. 1–7.
- 15 See Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', in Gerald Mast et al. (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 302–12; and 'The Apparatus: Metaphysical Approaches to Ideology', in *ibid.*, pp. 690–707; and Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (London: Macmillan, 1982).
- 16 See Lacan, 'Motifs du crime paranoïaque: le crime des sœurs Papin', *De la Psychose*, pp. 389–98.
- 17 Hart, *Fatal*, p. 146.
- 18 Lacan, 'Motifs', p. 397. Translation by author.
- 19 Quoted in Hart, *Fatal*, p. 146.
- 20 See Robert Stam et al. *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 129.
- 21 Jackie Stacey worked out the difference between these two forms of desire for female friendship in film and the lesbian spectator in 'Desperately Seeking Difference', *Screen*, 28:1 (1987): 48–61.
- 22 Aaron, 'Death', p. 76.
- 23 Ibid., p. 76.
- 24 Eunice's violence is, however, part and parcel of a complex sadomasochistic game in which she both executes and receives punishment. The killings are a far cry from the rape-revenge fury that is ruthlessly depicted in the nihilist film *Baise Moi* (*Fuck Me*; mysteriously released in the US as *Rape Me*). This recent variation on the female buddy movie (France, 2000) in which two soulmates bond and kill a range of men was made by two women filmmakers (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trin Thi). The film met with angry criticisms at its supposed hatred of men and was censored in many countries for its explicit portrayal of sex. Its critical reception recalls the angry reactions of male audiences to earlier feminist films in which women 'arbitrarily' kill men, such as *A Question of Silence* (Marleen Gorris, 1982). The fact that the five films which I discuss in this chapter have not met with such an angry outcry may have to do with the fact that the girls kill women rather than men (with the exception of *Butterfly Kiss*).
- 25 Doty, 'Queer', p. 149.