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Bodies that Kill
Art Cinema and its Murderous Girls in Love

Violent women have always been a lucrative lure for Hollywood. A female body in excess, that kills and murders, is quite a spectacle to watch. However, art cinema is not exactly wary of this theme either. In the mid nineties, five independent films were produced in which adolescent girls or young women seal their affections for each other in blood. It could be seen as a variation on the female buddy movie, the variation being that in these films an explicit lesbian kiss inevitably leads to murder. Young female bodies, passions, obsessions, fantasies, religious mania and class struggle make up the ingredients of *Sister My Sister*, *La Cérémonie*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Fun* and *Butterfly Kiss*.

These five films show a similar structure in which two lower-class girls are completely fascinated with one another, shutting everyone else out of their shared friendship of secrets and fantasies. Therefore, nobody can fathom the passionate bond between the girls. Erotic tension builds up in adolescent bodies that can hardly contain the passion. With the immanent threat of a separation the tension culminates in a murder, as gruesome as it is inevitable – the murder of a woman; the mother or a mother substitute. After the deed the women are separated from each other and detained in prison. The oedipal drama is rewritten in female terms.

Films that combine sex and violence are usually predicated on visual representations of the female body. Since Laura Mulvey's incisive intervention in the early seventies, cinematic voyeurism directed at the female body has been discussed extensively in film theory as "the male gaze". Although contemporary cinema has acknowledged the sexist bias of its conventional representation of the female body, voyeurism is difficult to avoid in the visual medium of cinema. The mere appearance of a woman on the screen brings along sexual connotations, which a filmmaker needs to consciously address in order to avoid a reenactment of the male gaze. The films that I discuss in this article are, however, not Hollywood films, but belong to independent cinema. Therefore, it can be expected that the films try to avoid the traditional visual discourse on the female body.

In the first part of this article I will address how the filmmakers deal with this issue. In the second half of the article I will discuss the disturbing trend which foregrounds the age-old association of female, and more specifically lesbian, sexuality with madness and violence. I will do so within the context of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory for reasons which will become apparent later. The five art films are chosen for their striking thematic and structural unity as well as for their release within virtually one year (1994-1995).

Murderous maids

The plot of *Sister My Sister* is derived from the "true story" of two domestic servants, the sisters Papin, who savagely killed their mistress and her daughter in a French provincial town in the 1930s. For many decades to come French intellectuals would spill their ink over this crime. The event stirred the imagination not least because the sisters were suspected of entertaining a homosexual-incestuous relationship with one another. Thus the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1975) analysed the murder as "paranoïa caused by repressed lesbian desires". His well-known theory of the mirror phase – the narcissistic love-hate relation to one's own mirror image – is said to be founded on this case. The

story inspired Jean Genet to write his famous play *The Maids*. Anarchists saw in the Papin sisters "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. And more recently this case became subject of feminist reflection (see Hart 1994, Lane 1993 and Ward-Jouve 1994). Thus, quite a history!

Sister My Sister opens with black-and-white images of two ragged girls playing with dolls. Then in colour it shows blood splattered walls. After this short flashback the film carefully traces the story behind those walls. A subtle reconstruction shows the daily life in the claustrophobic household of Madame Danzard, her unmarried daughter Isabelle, and the two maids, the immaculate sisters Christine and Lea who toil every day from five in the morning till ten at night. The sisters withdraw more and more from the oppressive authoritarian atmosphere in the house and lock themselves up in their little attic room, where they act out their fantasies or get lost in nightmares and memories of their childhood in a nunnery. When they decide to no longer visit their mother on Sundays, they lose touch with the world outside.

Within this repressed existence sexual desires take on feverish dimensions. The isolation in which Christine and Lea find themselves enables them to transgress the taboo on incest as well as homosexuality and thus they start a passionate sexual relation. *Sister My Sister* poetically films the despondent eroticism between the sisters, their bodies filmed in strong white light or in backlighting and half in the dark. By focusing more on the nervous despair rather than on the sexual encounter as such, the film avoids easy voyeurism of the girl's bodies.

With the passion strong emotions of fear and jealousy also come into being. The tension gradually increases and ever so slowly small things start going wrong, annoying their severe mistress. A vase falls, a sweeper lies on the floor, the food is too salty, a wine glass breaks. Finally the iron blows the fuses and the house is plunged into darkness. When Madame Danzard and her daughter come home, they grope for the stairs in the dark. As the sexual nature of the relationship between the sisters dawns

upon Madame Danzard, she spits out her disgust and threatens to separate them forever. That is the moment for a terrified Christine to launch an attack and blood splatters against the wall. The gruesome assault leaves the dead bodies of the mother and daughter half naked and terribly mutilated. Pieces of flesh, bones, teeth and one eye are strewn around. The naked bodies of the two sisters, which were earlier filmed in aesthetic imagery, have made way for the stark images of equally naked but utterly destroyed bodies of mother and daughter Danzard, in some kind of awkward parallelism.

Sister My Sister keeps the spectator glued to the screen although relatively little happens until the explosive ending. Suspense is built up by the careful delineation of the tedious lives of these women. The suspense is of course partly due to the fact that the film is based on a true story. One cannot help being curious about the how and why of this case; a curiosity that is only partly satisfied by the succinct information which is given in a short text at the end of the film. Christine was initially sentenced to death by the guillotine, a punishment which was later commuted to life imprisonment. Separated from her sister she collapsed psychically and died four years later in an asylum. After twenty years in prison Lea went to live with her mother and worked as a cleaning maid in a hotel until her death.

The French film *La Cérémonie* tells a similar kind of story. Sophie is hired as a live-in servant with the posh family Lelièvre in their remote mansion in the countryside. The silent and introverted Sophie becomes friends with the volatile and insubordinate post office employee of the village, Jeanne. The young women soon discover each other's secrets, not only the rather innocent ones – Sophie's illiteracy and Jeanne's pilfering of the mail – but lurking secrets that they have carefully hidden: they each lost a family member in an accident, Jeanne her little daughter and Sophie her violent father. There was never enough proof to convict them for murder, but the story suggests that the deaths were not mere accidents. Sharing these secrets forges a bond between them against the petit-bourgeois people of their immediate surroundings.

The scenes in which their friendship is sealed are situated

around or on the bed. They tumble giggling and tickling on the bed in Jeanne's home, their bodies maladroit and not knowing what to do with their affections. Later in Sophie's servant room in the big house, they watch television stiffly sitting against the bed with the arms tight around one another. This sultry uneasiness indicates a sexuality which cannot find expression within their stifling milieu. The film does not show any explicit eroticism between the two women, but rather focuses on the stiffness of their gestures and the rigidity of their young bodies, thus visually rendering the repression of their sexuality.

Their fostered disdain for the ruling class gradually turns into hatred. When Sophie is fired after her illiteracy is found out, the two friends almost casually shoot father, mother, daughter and son of the Lelièvre family in a sinister finale. Completely indifferent to what they have just done, they laughingly separate for the night. Jeanne is immediately killed in a car accident. Sophie watches impassively while the police quite accidentally find the audio tape which the family Lelièvre had put on to record an opera from the television. Against the background of Mozart's *Giovanni* the shooting has been entirely recorded.

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 slow reconstruction of seemingly meaningless details which acutely express the oppression and humiliation of the maids and takes the stories to their macabre endings.

Matricide

In *Heavenly Creatures* we again witness a *délire à deux*; of two girls kissing one another and committing murder. Here too the film opens with a flashback of the murder: two bloodstained girls run hysterically screaming from the bushes to the road. What led to this drama?

The story is set in the 1950s. Yvonne and Juliet have a history of illness and isolation in common. It is as if their intense and problematic psychic life is written on their body. Proudly they

exchange physical signs of their illness: blood and scars. It is in these physical ailments that their close friendship is sealed. The girls share a gift for creative imagination and set up an elaborate fantasy world, in which they soon get lost as they open up new horizons of the "Fourth Dimension". The film derives much of its force from the creative and humorous representation of this inner world, filmed with seductive camera movements and phantasmagoric special effects.

The borderline between reality and imagination becomes more and more unstable. In outbursts of energy, fantasy and passion grows an erotic relationship between Yvonne and Juliet. A relationship that finds further expression in their shared mythical kingdom "Borovnia". Here they take up different identities. First Yvonne is renamed Pauline, or just Paul. Then Pauline becomes Charles, the king of Borovnia who is married to Queen Deborah (Juliet). Together they beget a son Diello who becomes more and more violent and has already butchered 57 people at the blessed age of ten years. During Juliet's admission into a sanitarium to recover from tuberculosis, Yvonne/Pauline temporarily takes the identity of Gina, the gypsy servant of the queen. As Gina, she lives through a real-life affair with John, a tenant in the boarding house of her parents. While he deflowers her she withdraws from the heterosexual reality and desperately looks for Juliet/Deborah in her imagination. Only with great difficulty does she come back to the reality of her body being penetrated when the boy cries out "Yvonne" as he comes. Again, fantasy here indicates a denial of the body that seems deeply perturbing.

In poetry the girls describe themselves as "heavenly creatures". They pity the populace for being unable to value their true genius. Their parents, meanwhile, start worrying about the "unnatural bond" and the "obsessive friendship" between the girls. They plot for the girls to be separated. Pauline is sent to a psychiatrist to be diagnosed; he can hardly pronounce the verdict: h-h-h-homosexuality. Soon after that the girls have John killed by Diello in their fantasy realm. The gate with the iron grid that crushes him looks like a veritable *vagina dentata*. Then they proceed to fantasmatically kill the psychiatrist and the hos-

pital minister. The visual focus on bodies destroyed by the girls is quite horrific, although it remains clear to the spectator that these are fantasies. As in *Sister My Sister*, the scenes of mutilated bodies are contrasted with the excessive pleasure that the girls take into each other's bodies. *Heavenly Creatures* is by far the most explicit of the films discussed here in its erotic scenes. However, by focusing on the energy and happiness of the girls rather than on their naked bodies, the film avoids a voyeuristic gaze. The visual pleasure for the spectator is rather in the excess of the image. Though the girls are bordering on hysteria, it is out of excess rather than because of repression. The film makes their excess, whether in fantasy, emotion or sensuality, physically poignant, psychologically rich and visually spectacular.

However, reality threatens to overtake the girls. The divorce of Juliet's parents provides the immediate occasion for sending Juliet away to live with her aunt in South Africa, "for her health". Pauline insists on emigrating with Juliet but her mother refuses to let her go. In a total panic about the impending separation, Pauline decides to remove the obstacle to her happiness. She carefully plans the murder of her mother, in her diary announced as "the happy day".

In contrast to *Sister My Sister* where the murder is filmed in slow motion, in rapid montage and in the dark, the murder in *Heavenly Creatures* is filmed very realistically. This is the moment that the spectator turns her sympathies away from Pauline and Juliet. The murder draws a sharp boundary between reality and fantasy. The slaying is physically heavy and literally bloody work: the girls have to administer quite a lot of whacks on the mother's head before she dies.

The same kind of historical suspense that underlies *Sister My Sister* is also present in *Heavenly Creatures*. The films refer in the same way to the "true story" by ending with a short text about the court case and the further lives of the two murderesses. The girls were arrested on the same day of the murder. Pauline's diary formed the most important and damning proof in court. Because the two girls were too young for the death sentence, they were condemned to life imprisonment. However, they were released after five years on the condition that they never see each

other again. Juliet went to live with her mother in England and became a famous detective writer under a different name. Yvonne/Pauline was swallowed up in anonymity.

The horrific murders committed by the Papin sisters and by Juliet Hulme and Pauline Parker have become (in)famous crimes, which took on mythical proportions in their own countries. In interviews the filmmakers, Nancy Meckler of *Sister My Sister* and Peter Jackson of *Heavenly Creatures*, both claimed to have been so impressed by these histories that they wanted to give their own interpretation. For Meckler the key for the murder lies in Christine's fear of losing Lea through the manipulations of Madame Danzard and her incapacity to believe that she is really loved. Jackson too sees the threat of separation as the motive for the murder. But he also wanted to represent the emotional richness and creativity of two gifted girls in all their complexities. He has surely succeeded in his imaginative visual representations in *Heavenly Creatures*.

Killing for Fun

Heavenly Creatures and *Fun* show remarkable similarities in their narrative as well as in their cinematic form. Apparently the filmmakers have consciously looked for effects in colour and camera work to represent the unbridled energy of the adolescent girls. In contrast to *Sister My Sister* and *Heavenly Creatures*, *Fun* is not based on historical material, although 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".

Again a passion flourishes between two young girls who live in an imaginary world, with the difference that the girls in *Fun* have only known each other for a day when they commit the murder. The film puts the girls in parallel cinematic worlds: a black-and-white world set in the prison and filmed in a documentary style with a handheld camera; and a hyperreal technicolor world, the flashbacks of their one day together.

Hilary and Bonnie meet at a bus stop and it is love at first

sight. The girls connect in their loneliness and their yearning for love and attention. Within a few minutes of their meeting Hilary distantly and matter-of-factly tells Bonnie that she has been repeatedly raped by her father. Bonnie responds by saying that she has been deflowered by her brother. It all sounds true and authentic enough, but later in the house of detention it transpires that Bonnie is still a virgin, at which Hilary feels painfully betrayed in her trust. As a small girl, Bonnie was abandoned by her mother and she makes up for the lack of love and care in her life with stories and fantasies. In this American independent film sexual abuse and affective negligence are woven into the background of the story. This may raise the question whether the incest motif has become lucrative for cinema, but *Fun* criticizes the media's exploitation of stories of sexual abuse. The female psychiatrist in the film is quite cynical about the reporter who initially only wants to write a sensational story. Gradually he becomes involved with the emotional life of the two girls and in the end he does not deliver his story to the paper.

As in the other films, we again witness a delirious *folie à deux*. The murder could only happen because of the closeness between the two friends. Bonnie needs Hilary to channel her anger; Hilary needs Bonnie's energy to act on her desire for revenge. As in *Heavenly Creatures*, the shared energy between the girls is one of excess rather than of repression. Cinematic voyeurism is avoided because the camera never lingers on the young female bodies, but rather tries to keep up with their nervous overactivity. Although there is no explicit sexual encounter between the girls, the erotic tension is palpable. They spend the day together, hugging, throwing stones, shouting insults, getting into mischief, stirring one another up into a euphoria which inevitably culminates in the murder of an arbitrary victim. They kill an old woman. Just like that. For no apparent reason really. For fun. That is at least what they say: "fun is number one". The film ends with the final separation between the two girls in prison upon which Bonnie commits suicide. In the theoretical reflection on these films I will discuss whether it was indeed a murder of an arbitrary person, but first I will turn to the fifth and last art film about murderous girls, *Butterfly Kiss*.

Redemption

Butterfly Kiss differs from the other films in that it does not feature one passionate murder, but a series of murders, mostly of men. The film is situated in the wretched landscape of British roads and urban wastelands. Eunice roves the highways, searching for her holy grail, Judith, the one human being who ever loved her. The opening scene shows us a confused and aggressive Eunice asking the servant in a petrol station whether she is Judith. Some minutes later we see the woman lying dead on the floor. When Eunice repeats her question in the next petrol station, we fear for the life of the sympathetic and somewhat simple Miriam. But when the desperate Eunice throws petrol over herself, Miriam calms her down and takes her home. There they make love – although “love” may not be the right word for their forlorn act. Under her clothes Eunice wears iron chains on her body; masochistic symbols for both her sexuality and her religious mania. Although the scene is potentially voyeuristic, visual pleasure is denied to the spectator because the camera does not linger on the bodies of the women as such. Rather, the scene shows the intense pain of Eunice, enhanced by the literalness of her chains. Again, psychic pain is written on the body, not through illness, but through the practice of sadomasochism.

The film is of a desolate beauty. Careful attention is paid to every detail: the landscape, the dialogues, the music. Just as in *Fun* the present narrative is told in black and white, with the flashbacks of the past story in colour. It is Miriam who tells her story to the video camera in her tiled prison cell. The two women hitchhike across the country, killing along the way. Miriam (Mi, “me”) naively decides to bring out the good in Eunice (Eu, “you”). She is however under Eunice’s spell to such a degree that she covers up for the murders that Eunice commits in her madness. She quietly gets rid of the dead men that she time and again finds in the boots of their stolen cars.

Butterfly Kiss is the only film that points to a religious crisis. Eunice regularly talks to God in a transcendental desire for divine punishment and redemption. She accuses God of not even noticing her in spite of the sinful deeds she performs time and

again. She is somehow begging God to see and acknowledge her by committing violent sex and murders. Final redemption, however, does not seem to come from God. Her only way of being "delivered" is by being killed herself. Therefore, Eunice asks Miriam for the ultimate gesture of her love and dedication: she wants to be killed by her. In a magical scene Miriam drowns Eunice in the sea – suicide, murder or baptism?

Mirrors

These five films visually foreground the spectacle of adolescent, white, trembling female bodies trying to be friends, to make love, to have sex. The very same girlish bodies that turn violent when separation threatens them. In order to understand the cinematic representation of these stories of murderous girls I will make a theoretical excursion into Lacanian psychoanalysis. Firstly, Lacan had a great interest in the crime of the Papin sisters and based part of his later reflections on the mirror phase on this case (Lacan 1966 and 1975). Secondly the concept of the mirror phase has had a great influence on film theory (see Baudry 1992a, 1992b, Metz 1977).

What did the Papin crime mean to Lacan? In his early practice and perhaps all his life long Lacan was fascinated by women who had committed a crime, especially by what he saw as the paranoid female criminal. According to him, the paranoid structure means that the female criminal sees her mirror image reflected in her victim. Thus, the Papin sisters hated in their employers – mother and daughter – their own projected suffering.

Lynda Hart points out that Lacan thought he could observe a secret in female criminals: "the danger of too much closeness" (1994: 146). This proximity between two women is related to the notion of "perfect love". It can have disastrous consequences and explode in aggressivity when the subjects are forced to allow the outside world into the relationship or when they are forced to separate. Lacan attributes an "erotomaniac" component to this kind of paranoia, consisting of repressed homosexuality.

The Papin sisters did cherish a homosexual love for each

other; so much is clear. The fact that one sister loves another sister points to a strong element of narcissism in that love. Both sisters loved someone like herself the most, someone in the mirror as it were. 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" (Lacan 1975: 397, translation AS). 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" (quoted in Hart 1994: 146). This means 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 universal 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 that gives it access to the outside world, in Lacan's terminology the Symbolic order. The Symbolic equals the social and cultural order which is dominated by the "law of the father" (in French "*le Nom-du-père*", the name of the father, which is homonymous with "*le Non-du-père*", the "no of the father"). There is no doubt that Lacan's symbolic order is the equivalent of a patriarchal order. The entry into the Symbolic takes place with the acquisition of language and the beginning of the oedipal stage.

The Imaginary is characterized by visual processes and by a close relation to the mother or caretaker. To come back to the mirror phase: this 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 whole, autonomous, complete and separate, while the child does not yet control its own body and does not yet experience itself as a separate entity from the mother. Lacan (1977) describes the moment of this recognition as a "jubilant" triumph. The mirror here should not

be taken too literally; the child can also see its perfect image reflected in the eyes of the loving mother/other.

This newly acquired identity is, however, based on an optical illusion because the child "misrecognizes" itself as a autonomous unity. It identifies with the imago of its own body, an image which is all the more idealized 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 mirror image is internalized as an ideal-ego; an ideal image providing the self with narcissistic power.

The process of the formation of the self during the mirror stage forms the basis for all later identifications. For Lacan each identification is structurally imaginary, that is to say it is based on fictive imagos. This is where the connection to cinema can be made, because in cinema the spectator's identification is effected through imagos; through visual imagery. The subject's identity is always under threat because it is dependent on a fundamental misrecognition during the mirror stage; identity is built upon a fiction, an imago. Hence, the importance of visual representations. The Imaginary is not so much a stage, as a psychic register that remains influential throughout adulthood, especially in love relations (see Stam *et al.* 1992: 129).

The identity of the self is in fact nothing other than 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 essay; I will come back to this point. 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 idealized mirror image, the distance between self and other is as fictional and imaginary as one's own identity. That distance, "the correct distance", is in fact a precarious balance which can be undone at any moment. The subject has to continually play acrobatics in order to guard that boundary. The loss of the boundary between self and other will swallow up the

subject.

On the basis of the inseparability and the "dangerous" closeness of the sisters Papin, Lacan theorized a psychical structure which he later conceptualized in the mirror stage. For Lacan the same-sex love between women equals the loss of the boundary between self and other. Self and other are inextricably bound to each other. This bond 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

How can the concept of the mirror stage help us to understand the love and violence of the girls in *Sister My Sister*, *La Cérémonie*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Fun* and *Butterfly Kiss*? The mirroring, narcissistic relation between the girls is hardly visually represented in these films, with the exception maybe of Sophie's imitation of the hairdo and clothing style of her friend Jeanne in *La Cérémonie*. This is quite refreshing because it has become such a Hollywood cliché to film the female body in front of literal mirrors, thus doubling visual pleasure for the male spectator as well as asserting the femme fatale's inherent narcissism and duplicity.

Although narcissism is a necessary psychic structure for human wellbeing, 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 basis for all love relations, not only for homosexual love relations.

In all of the five art films there is definitely a high level of identification between the girls. The physical friendship and love between the girls 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). This difference is hardly noticed by Lacan. In his theory he is so blinded by the sexual difference between men and women that he is unable to recognize the differences between 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 between the female friends is not denied.

In all five films the girls commit a murder when a forced separation is threatening or actually happening. In *Fun* Bonnie commits suicide after she is separated from her friend. In *Butterfly Kiss* Eunice starts killing after she has lost the 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 a sweet, old 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.

As mentioned above, the girls do not allow others into their friendship. 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 into the 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 certainly have good reasons for patricide. I think that the reason can be found in the nature of the friendship of these girls. In their relationship the girls ascribe more meaning to the Imaginary than to the Symbolic. The narcissistic identification and the major role of fantasy both point to the primary function of the Imaginary. In this context it is important to realize 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 traumatic process of breaking out of the symbiotic relation with the mother. When at a later stage in life the threat of another separation dawns, breaking off the intense and loving friendship with another girl, the deep fear and pain of the initial trauma are awakened. 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 costs. 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 offered on the altar of love between the girls.

There may be another motive at play as well. Lacan saw the Papin sisters 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, it is certain that they want to avoid the conventional ideal of womanhood and its concomitant role of mother and housewife. The mother is precisely that which they do not wish to become. The matricide can be read as a symbolic murder of traditional femininity and thus of the patriarchal family.

Paradoxes

Sister My Sister, *La Cérémonie*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Fun and Butterfly Kiss* are films that leave the spectator deeply moved. Not only because of their shocking stories, but also because of their aesthetic quality: superb acting, creative camera work, beautiful imagery and original scripts. The main attraction, however, lies in the uncompromising passion of the girls. They are fascinating characters in their transgressive behaviour who carry away the spectator in the maelstrom of their passions. In short, these are perturbing films that the spectator will not easily forget.

But of course these are also perturbing films because they connect adolescent female bodies and violence, lesbian desire and pathology, same-sex love and bloodthirstiness. This stereotypical image has always been represented in Hollywood films with quite some gusto (recent examples are *Thelma and Louise*, *Basic Instinct*, *Bound*; see Holmland 1994). Can we therefore detect an ancient and old-fashioned image behind the seduction of secrets, fantasies and passions? I don't think so. Art films are too idiosyncratic to merely confirm such a stereotype, although it is definitely lurking in the shady background. The main difference between art films and Hollywood films can be situated in the point of view. Whereas in Hollywood cinema the pathological lesbian is represented from a male perspective, the point of view in art films lies unambiguously with the girls. First of all, this avoids the conventional voyeurism aimed at the female body, especially at the attractive body of the female adolescent. This kind of voyeurism is absent from the films I have discussed here. We do see naked bodies, and we do see female bodies making love to one another, but the cinematic style privileges depth of feeling and excess of passion over the cheap thrills of sleazy sex. Visual pleasure in these films lies elsewhere: in a refined aesthetic style or in cinematic excess.

Not only is the visual point of view attached to the female characters, also the narrative point of view lies unambiguously with them. Because the stories of art films are told from the girls' perspective, the spectator aligns her sympathy with them. The films project a position for the female spectator of identifi-

cation 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 which is all too often neglected in our culture. Probably most spectators are put off by the carnage, but by then the films have produced an understanding if not sympathy for the rich 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 patriarchal society. The filmmakers have delved into the unconscious of young women and thus produced complex characters beyond stereotyping.

The ten girls in these films embody the paradoxes of young female adulthood. Their young bodies cannot take the conflicting emotions and passions that are running through them. Actively desiring, refusing to be desired in heterosexual terms, transgressing the boundaries of their class and gender, their bodies become the site of struggle. The key term here is excess. On the verge of exhilarated exhaustion, anorexia or suicide, their bodies falter and fall ill. Full of anger, they resist. Bursting with life, overflowing with emotion, alive with creativity, they exceed their bodies and fly into the imagination. Until their passions catch up with them and they fall into the delirium of their own pathos. Then the young female body in excess cannot help but kill. The films avoid a moral stance, but suggest that our culture should perhaps attend more carefully to the complex inner life of young girls. Thus the films maintain the paradox that Christine and Lea, Sophie and Jeanne, Pauline and Juliet, Hilary and Bonny, and Eunice and Miriam are both dangerous misfits and heavenly creatures.

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- *Butterfly Kiss*, UK, 1994, directed by Michael Winterbottom, written by Frank Cottrell Boyce, with Amanda Plummer as Eunice and Saskia Reeves as Miriam, 85 mins.
- *La Cérémonie*, France/Germany, 1995, written and directed by Claude Chabrol, based on the novel *A Judgement in Stone* by Ruth Rendell, with Sandrine Bonnaire as Sophie and Isabelle Huppert as Jeanne, 111 mins.
- *Fun*, USA/Canada, 1994, directed by Rafael Zelinski and written by James Bosley, with Alicia Witt as Bonnie and Renée Humphrey as Hilary, 100 mins.
- *Heavenly Creatures*, New Zealand, 1994, directed by Peter Jackson, written by Peter Jackson and Frances Walsh, with Melanie Lynskey as Pauline/Yvonne Parker and Kate Winslet as Juliet Hulme, 98 mins.
- *Sister My Sister*, UK, 1994, directed by Nancy Meckler, written by Wendy

Kesselman (based on her play *My Sister In This House*, 1981), with Joely Richardson as Christine Papin and Jodhy May as Lea Papin, 89 mins.