
Twisted sisters?

The murderess and her identification with the victim

Johanna Pakkanen

Fatal attraction (US 1987, dir. Adrian Lyne) started a new tradition in the genre of Hollywood thriller with a new creation of the femme fatale-type. A destructive woman moving about and around the heterosexual nuclear family or couple is also represented in *The hand that rocks the cradle* (US 1992, dir. Curtis Hanson) and *Single white female* (US 1992, dir. Barbet Schroeder).¹ There can also be seen a new cultural space of feminist revenge fantasies opening in the 1990's, in Hollywood especially with *Thelma and Louise* (1991).

With my choice of subject and perspective I show some alienation for those forms of lesbian/ feminist studies, which see the representations of non-heterosexual violent women as marks of misogyny and homophobia. Instead I argue that there are many optional reading positions for these movies, one of them allowing a revealing of the vulnerability of the heterosexual family institution.

I am interested in the danger lurking behind the homosociality of two women in *The hand that rocks the cradle* (HRC) and *Single white female* (SWF). In my study I will focus on representations of home. In relation to the female homosociality I will look for example at metaphors of the mirror, twinning and the closet.²

Introduction

I find that when discussing violence and gender, the issue of cultural representations of violent women is very important. Nevertheless this issue has gotten only minor attention within women's studies. They have mostly concentrated on male violence against women.

The feminist discussion of the representations of violent women arose when feminists started to criticize the image of deviant women in criminology. Feminists claimed that the common criminological approach was individually based and was pathologising women's violence. In this context violent women are often described as child-like and non-feminine freaks, some kind of gender exceptions (Shaw & Dubois 1995). It has been argued that this is also usually the way female gender and violence is represented in popular culture.

The representations of the real life crimes or criminals and the fictional representations in popular culture aren't necessarily totally separate phenomena. It is more or less a two-way road. Alice Myers and Sarah Wright (1996 p. xii) have written about the media representations of real crimes. They have pointed out that media is especially interested in *women's* violent crimes.³ They argue that it is easier to get attention when there are conventions to rely on, popular culture conventions of representing violent women. Helen Birch (1994) argues that popular culture, especially Hollywood cinema, has clearly influenced news casting. The media has started to attract audiences by using images and shocking headlines, similar to those present in Hollywood cinema.

It is obvious that the subject 'violent woman' has been problematic for feminists as well. The research on representations of violent women is not very widespread. Studies concerned with real life violent women are focusing on women's violence as a response to an abusive relationship, usually family violence.⁴ (Shaw & Dubois 1995.)

Politics of representation

In the context of queer film studies Ellis Hanson (1999a p. 190-191) has argued that lesbian and gay film criticism has suffered of too much political correctness. This is related to a narrow politics of representation and a search for positive or accurate images. One of the consequences of this approach is that there must be a wide range of lesbian and gay spectators with false consciousness and a somehow disturbed gaze/ position as a spectator. The diversity of a non-heterosexual reception is not admitted. In the same time an overly simplified straight spectatorship is constructed. In search for positive images the scholars start asking how *they* look at us, how *they* see us (Hanson 1999b). Both 'they' and 'us' need to be deconstructed.

I cannot accept the notion of early lesbian studies, that there is one universal homophobic tradition in cinema and literature of representing lesbians as delinquent and degenerated. Referring to Hanson I claim that this notion, originally related to the history of cinema, could contaminate the studies of contemporary cinema with a moralistic tone. Should some movies be doomed too politically incorrect even to be analysed?⁵ I would rather see different representations having many optional interpretations, without the need to be claiming representations 'negative' or 'positive', or believing that cultural representations should be seen in a mimetic, and therefore subordinate, relation to 'real life'.

Some theoretical paths to be considered

In the tradition of male detective stories (and the TV/ movie versions of them) there is a convention of 'mirror images'. The concept refers to the relation

between the detective and the criminal. The crime to be solved is often linked to some emotional trauma of the detective, and the character of the murderer can be seen as a reminder of the protagonist's past. The detective needs to be able to identify with the criminal, 'to become the murderer' in order to solve the puzzle. This concept has not been discussed much in the context of female detective stories.

The question is whether there is a mirror image also between the female murderer and her victim, and whether this can be seen as posing a threat to the heterosexual order. A process of two-dimensional identification, a kind of mirror image, can be read between the single female murderer and the non-single heterosexual female victim in some Hollywood thrillers. This involves an aspect of female homosociality.

Lynda Hart (1994) has pointed out that both 'the violent woman' as a cultural construction and the pathologising of lesbianism are used to support the white heterosexual patriarchy. It can be said that both 'the lesbian' and the 'violent woman' are drawing the borderlines of a 'good heterosexual woman'. Heteronormative femininity and normative heterosexuality need their opposites to become more visible and clear. According to Hart 'the lesbian' and 'the violent woman' are made to work together as cultural constructions to support the heterosexual order.

I am still in search of an approach to the certain female closeness in the movies I am interested in. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggested in *Epistemology of the closet* (1991) that the homo/heterosexual crisis is a definition that shapes western concerns about identity and social organization. She argued that heterosexuality needs homosexuality as a binary opposition and that heterosexuality is reinforced through the representations of homosociality and its denial of homosexuality. On same time she made clear that she was talking about *male* homosexuality and homosociality. As fascinating as it would be, I have doubts about directly applying a theory like that to a study of the cultural representations of *women*.

Patricia Juliana Smith has attempted to do so in *Lesbian panic: Homoeroticism in modern British women's fiction* (1997). Smith's concept 'lesbian panic' is related to Sedgwick's 'homosexual panic' in male-authored novels. In Smith's analyses lesbian panic concerns the uncertainty of the female protagonist or antagonist about her own sexual identity. Smith points out that as objects women can not construct an exchange system of men, parallel to the male woman-exchange system in Sedgwick's theory. For Smith, lesbian panic arises from the ideology that sexual and social independence of a woman would lead her to be blamed a lesbian. The heterosexuality of women is easily threatened. For Smith the internalised (by women writers, by lesbian writers, by all women) lesbian panic is one of the tools of patriarchal social surveillance. It is theoretically alienating

that she joins the tradition of a politics of representation with her idea of a kind of 'real and true' narrative, which has not yet been written down because the writer has suffered from 'lesbian panic'.

Outsiders

For me *Single white female* and *The hand that rocks the cradle* are the younger sisters of *Fatal attraction* (FA). The last has been the subject of many feminist studies, but *The hand that rocks the cradle*, which even 'borrows' scenes from FA, has not gotten as much attention.

The movie version of SWF would fall within the concept of the 'twinning' effect.⁶ A lost twin sister is represented as a motive in the movie plot. The novel lacks the twin sister motive. In the novel the murderer was explicitly bisexual.⁷ In the movie version her bisexual tendencies are not as clear, even though one does not necessary need a complex analysis to notice a female-female desire in Jennifer Jason Leigh's gestures and some images. The final confrontation scene situated in the basement is loaded with closet (coming out) and mirror (sameness, twinning) metaphors.

Christine Holmlund has pointed out that contemporary Hollywood cinema has been overly keen to give several motives for fictional female killers. That is also the case with SWF and HRC. Because of represented emotional traumas, the spectator can relate to the murderers, and in a way begin to understand their actions. They are outsiders with a desire to quit the outsider position and enter the core. Both movies are trespassing stories of outsiders into the heterosexual couple or families. In HRC there is another outsider character beside the murderer, a black retarded man. He is helping with the house renovation and mostly working outside the house. He is framed guilty by the blond blue-eyed woman; the actual trespasser. In the end the big, child-like, black man's force is needed to finally destroy the violent woman.

In both of the more recent movies as well as in the preceding *Fatal attraction*, the borderlines of the household are meaningful scenes; the garden (HRC, FA); the basement of the flat (SWF); the glaze house (HRC); the fence (HRC). The borderline can also be marked by an outsider lurking inside the house through a window. In both HRC and SWF the violent woman has a deep relationship to the heterosexual 'good' woman. In both movies the violent woman enters the house or apartment of the victim and lives there almost as a family member for a while. They are stories of companionships and living arrangements of two women denying the power difference between them (employer – employee or made; renter – tenant). The companionship ends violently, and even if other people are involved, the conflict between the two women is crucial.

I want to read these movies in the context of the recent crises of the heterosexual

nuclear family and heterosexuality. The other woman is destroyed to protect the life and heterosexual life style of the planned victim. Therefore the representations of non-normative violent women in SWF and HRC can also have interpretations where the vulnerability and constructionality of the heterosexual family institution is revealed. All representations of violent women are not to be claimed misogynous or homophobic, when there are non-normative reading positions available.

Notes

- ¹ *Basic Instinct*, that also came out in 1992 (US, dir. Paul Verhoeven) features a bisexual murderess-character with omnipotent power.
- ² This paper is related to my PhD thesis on progress in comparative literature and women's studies (University of Tampere, Finland). My thesis will be on the cultural representations of female murderers in the late 20th century, mostly the 1990's. Cultural representations will be tracked down from cinema and literature, in literature specifically from lesbian / feminist detective stories.
- ³ There is a huge contrast between the public image of a female offender and the average female offender in reality. Internationally women commit far fewer crimes than men. The violent charges on women are usually on less serious violent crimes than the crimes men are charged for. When women kill, the victim is more often someone they know. Christine Holmlund (1994, p. 128) has pointed out that when most women killers have family members or people they know as their victims, Hollywood movies may feature women killing people they know, but never people who are close to them.
- ⁴ Family meaning exclusively heterosexual families.
- ⁵ For me it is confusing that some of my identifications with representations of violent women (not all, of course) have not been given space in the lesbian/ feminist research tradition.
- ⁶ On twinning see for example Reina Lewis ja Katrina Rolley 1996.
- ⁷ The movie is based on *SWF seeks same* (1990) by John Lutz

References

- Birch, Helen (1994): "Introduction" in Helen Birch (ed.): *Moving targets: Women, murder and representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1994.
- Hansen, Ellis (1999a): "Lesbians who bite" in Ellis Hanson (ed.): *Out takes: Essays on queer theory and film*. Durham: Duke University Press 1999.
- (1999b): "Introduction: Out takes" in Ellis Hanson (ed.): *Out takes: Essays on queer theory and film*. Durham: Duke University Press 1999.
- Hart, Lynda (1994): "Introduction" in Lynda Hart (ed.): *Fatal women: Lesbian sexuality and the mark of aggression*. Lontoo: Routledge 1994.
- Holmlund, Christine (1994): "A decade of deadly dolls: Hollywood and the woman killer" in Helen Birch (ed.) *Moving targets: Women, murder and representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1994.
- Lewis, Reina & Rolley, Katrina (1996) "(Ad)ressing the dyke: lesbian looks and lesbians looking" in Peter Horne and Reina Lewis (eds.): *Outlooks: Lesbian and gay sexualities and visual cultures*. London and New York: Routledge 1996 .
- Myers, Alice & Wight, Sarah (1996): "Introduction" in Alice Myers & Sarah Wight (eds.): *No*

angels: *Women who commit violence*. London: Pandora 1996.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky (1991): *Epistemology of the closet*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1991.

Shaw, Margaret & Dubois, Sheryl (1995): *Understanding violence by women: A review of the literature*. Correctional Service of Canada. FSW Nr. 23.

Smith, Patricia Juliana (1997): *Lesbian panic: Homoeroticism in modern British women's fiction*. New York: Columbia University Press 1997.

Johanna Pakkanen (M.A.) is a Ph.D. student in comparative literature at the University of Tampere, Finland. Her dissertation will be on the cultural representations of female murderers in late 20th century having the main theoretical framework in queer studies on literature and cinema.