VIOLENT WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

JANICE LORECK

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Introduction

Narrative cinema is filled with moments that present the violent woman as an enigma. In Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009), a psychotherapist takes his bereaved wife into his care as a patient. During their many sessions, he asks her to recount her fears and memories: unresponsive to her husband's treatment, the woman retaliates by inflicting acts of violence upon him. A similar scenario of interrogation takes place in *The Reader* (Stephen Daldry, 2008): a judge presiding over a war crimes trial repeatedly asks a former *Schutzstaffel* guard to account for her actions. Confused and evasive, the woman replies, 'Well, what would *you* have done?' Even if a film does not literally command the violent woman to speak in this manner, many inscribe a desire to reveal her subjectivity onscreen. *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994) opens as two teenage girls run screaming through a public park, covered in the blood of a woman they have just murdered. *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis, 2001) centres on the search to cure a diseased woman who murders her lovers. *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003) retrospectively explores the circumstances surrounding real-life murderer Aileen Wuornos's acts of homicide. Road movie *Baise-moi* (Coralie Trinh Thi and Virginie Despentes, 2000) uncovers its murderous protagonists' intimate pleasures and deprivations in explicit detail. Violent men seldom provoke the same kind of investigation. Although a man's violence might be represented as heroic or villainous, rarely is his capacity for physical aggression depicted as problematic in and of itself. When a woman commits an act of violence, her behaviour – indeed, her very existence – causes profound unease and questioning.

This sense of exigency is in some ways surprising. Women who murder or physically harm other people have long been a part of Western popular culture. The past century has seen a range of violent women

appear on cinema screens, such as the *femmes fatales* of 1930s and 1940s film noir, the female freaks and monsters of 1950s horror films, the vigilante heroines of 1970s blaxploitation, and the beautiful warriors of late 1990s and early 2000s action cinema. Popular cinema of the past decade has showcased dozens of such character types. Athletic protagonists feature in *Lucy* (Luc Besson, 2014) and *Haywire* (Steven Soderbergh, 2011); violent girls appear in *Kick-Ass* (Matthew Vaughn, 2010) and *Sucker Punch* (Zack Snyder, 2011); female avengers populate *Kill Bill Vols 1 & 2* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003; 2004) and *The Brave One* (Neil Jordan, 2007); and psychotic murderesses star in *Excision* (Richard Bates, Jr, 2012) and *Nurse 3D* (Doug Aarniokoski, 2013).

Looking at these examples, it seems that female heroes and villainesses are now fully integrated into popular culture. Yet the fascination expressed in films like *Antichrist*, *Trouble Every Day*, *Baise-moi*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Monster* and *The Reader* suggests that the violent woman's implications for cultural ideas about femininity remain unresolved. Moreover, these films do not hail from the same filmic milieu as the exploitation, action and horror genres that commonly host the violent woman. Rather, they circulate within groupings positioned in elevated counter-distinction to popular cinema: *Heavenly Creatures*, for instance, screened on the international festival circuit where it won the prestigious Silver Lion at the 51st Venice International Film Festival. *Trouble Every Day* screened at the 54th Cannes International Film Festival, the premier event for art cinema exhibition; eight years later, *Antichrist* premiered at the 62nd Cannes Festival. *The Reader* and *Monster* both won Academy Awards for their lead actresses' performances, an accolade that Mark Jancovich suggests has the capacity to bestow the status of 'quality drama' upon film texts (2002b: 153). Even Coralie Trinh Thi and Virginie Despentes's explicit film *Baise-moi* earned credibility when several highly respected directors, including Catherine Breillat, Jean-Luc Godard and Claire Denis, publicly defended the film following its censorship in France (MacKenzie 2002: 319). These texts indicate that the violent woman's transgressive subjectivity is under negotiation within multiple milieus of film culture.

Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema emerges in response to the need to account for these films. It investigates the curiosity that surfaces about homicidal women in films outside the Hollywood genres where she is commonly found, examining a set of art texts and independently produced dramas that researchers have yet to draw together, and therefore critically explore, as 'violent women films'. Some of these texts have attracted scholarly attention as part of specific conceptual

groupings – for instance, as participating in a much-discussed 'new extremity' in European filmmaking of the past decade (in the case of *Antichrist*, *Trouble Every Day* and *Baise-moi* [Horeck and Kendall 2011; Quandt 2004]) or as 'killer lesbian' films that emerged adjacent to the New Queer Cinema movement in 1991 and 1992 (in the case of *Heavenly Creatures* [Aaron 1999; Rich 1995]). However, the ways that these films collectively represent women's violence in contrast to popular film has not been explored in detail. This omission is conspicuous. The texts that I have highlighted are provocative, thought-provoking cultural objects. Their violent female protagonists impress with their eccentricity, extremity and eroticism: *Antichrist* is a dark story about a grief-stricken mother whose angst transforms into violence towards her spouse; *Trouble Every Day* is a melancholic story about a woman who suffers from aggressive impulses; *Baise-moi* portrays the lives of two marginalised women who go on a hyper-violent road trip. Moreover, these films directly invite the spectator's curiosity about the violent woman in ways that beg consideration. Some, like *Monster* and *The Reader*, foreground her subjectivity for the audience's interrogation, structuring their narratives around the question of 'why' she resorted to violence. Others, like *Baise-moi* and *Heavenly Creatures*, implicitly encourage audiences' interest in their protagonists' personalities, gradually revealing the violent woman's hopes, desires and motivations as the narrative unfolds. In other words, these tales about violent women not only circulate as arresting cultural objects; they also initiate a discussion about female violence, an act that signals their consequence in the broader culture's exploration of gendered identities.

Films about female violence emerge in a cultural environment that is ambivalent regarding women's propensity for aggressive behaviour. On one hand, the view that women are less inclined to violence than men remains culturally entrenched. Indeed, the notion that femininity is essentially pacifist extends back to some of the earliest accounts of womanhood. In *History of Animals*, Aristotle describes females as 'more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears . . . more shrinking, more difficult to rouse to action' (1862: 231 [bk 9, ch 1]). Although the origins of this concept are millennia old, the idea of female non-aggression continues to manifest in all manner of contemporary discourses (even those that are seen as ideologically opposed to one another). As Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry write, 'A conservative interpretation [of gender] sees women as peaceful and apolitical, a liberal view understands women as a pacifying influence on politics, and feminists who study global politics often critique the

masculine violence of interstate relations' (2007: 2). As such, the view that women are less likely than men to inflict physical harm upon others – or, in a similar vein, more often the victims of violence than the perpetrators – is an enduring and pervasive perspective in present-day culture.

At the same time, however, madwomen, female monsters and killers are ubiquitous in global narrative traditions in ways that suggest that women have an innate capacity for vindictive cruelty; that they are, so to speak, 'more deadly than the male'. Within a cinema context, it is possible to identify dozens of *femmes fatales*, madwomen and female sadists who fit this description in a wide variety of films extending across national borders. Some examples include the insane villainesses of horror films like *Ôdishon* (Miike Takashi, 1999) and *À l'intérieur* (Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo, 2007), the seductive manipulators of *Suburban Mayhem* (Paul Goldman, 2006) and *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992), and the inherently malicious women of exploitation cinema, such as the eponymous *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmonds, 1975). The persistence of such archetypes in global storytelling traditions reveals that cultural discourses often construct women as crueller and more violent than men.

Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema approaches films that depict the violent woman as a creative response to this ideological struggle – an attempt to textually conceive of violent female subjectivity. These texts grapple with some of the most entrenched assumptions regarding masculinity, femininity and violence. As Sjoberg and Gentry straightforwardly put it, 'Women's violence falls outside of . . . ideal-typical understanding of what it means to be a woman' because '*women* are not supposed to be violent' (2007: 2) (original emphasis). Moreover, as observed by Hilary Neroni, the violent woman is a disruptive figure who overturns 'the ideological structures (most especially those involving gender) that regulate our experiences' (2005: x). Whether they are depicted as heroines, villainesses or morally ambiguous characters, women who harm other people are challenging, 'difficult' subjects who undermine some of the most entrenched gender norms of Western culture. As such, *Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema* asks how these films engage in textual explorations of their protagonists' subjectivities in light of this overturning. It seeks to determine how these films embark on a poetic mapping of the violent female subject, drawing upon film's textual properties to express her experience, discover the aetiologies of her violence and produce her subjectivity.

Violent women in cinema

Over the past three decades, film researchers have enthusiastically responded to the ideological challenge that violent women in cinema make to gender categories. In their foundational study *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies*, for example, Martha McCaughey and Neal King and observe that 'a rich and diverse literature' surrounds women who commit acts of violence onscreen (2001: 2). This is, in many respects, an accurate assessment; the past thirty years have seen dozens of essays and books investigate the violent woman's manifestation in a variety of different film forms and through several critical lenses, such as race, sexuality, ideology and genre.[1] Indeed, some of these works – such as the collection *Women in Film Noir* (1998), Clover's work on the 'Final Girl' in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (1992) and Creed's exploration of monstrous femininity in *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993) – have become significant texts within the discipline of feminist film scholarship more generally.[2] The violent woman is therefore not merely a common and enduring figure of cinema culture: she is also a favoured object of enquiry that has regularly been at the forefront of research on gender and film.

Within this diverse scholarship about female violence in popular cinema, however, a recurring set of hypotheses has gained centrality and thus shaped how these characters are critically understood. The first – which I term the 'film-as-cultural-symptom' hypothesis – sees the violent woman as a product of changing cultural attitudes about gender. Researchers such as Frank Krutnik have linked the *femmes fatales* of the original film noir cycle to the upheavals in the workforce and family during the 1940s post-war period (1991: 63); Stephane Dunn and Yvonne D. Sims associate blaxploitation vigilantes with second-wave feminism and the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Dunn 2008: 126; Sims 2006: 26); Lisa Coulthard and Rebecca Stringer connect popular action heroines to the post-feminist and neoliberalist eras of the 1990s (Coulthard 2007: 154–5; Stringer 2011: 269). Such research conceptualises the violent woman as a textual manifestation of an anxiety, trauma or ambivalence about gender that is characteristic of a particular historical moment.

The other most common critical means of assessing the violent woman in popular cinema has been to investigate her as a trope of a specific genre, such as horror, film noir, action, slasher film, rape-revenge or exploitation. This is an extensive body of work that includes

the influential texts that I mention above, as well as more recent work by Sherrie A. Inness (2004) and Marc O'Day (2004) on the action cinemas of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Jacinda Read (2000) and Barbara Creed (1993) on the rape-revenge cycle, and Dunn (2008) and Sims (2006) on 1970s blaxploitation. In most cases, these studies' primary goal is to give an account of how the violent woman integrates with the tropes, pleasures or functioning of a chosen genre. For instance, the work of O'Day, Inness and Dunn singles out narrative agency and display of corporeal utility as key traits of the violent woman in action and blaxploitation; such traits are essential to ensuring the forward momentum of these genres' plots. Similarly, according to Creed's analysis of horror cinema, the female monster complements the genre's *raison d'être*: that is, she horrifies audiences with her abjection (1993: 7). Another example is Mary Ann Doane's analysis of the *femme fatale*, in which she states that the fatal woman's deviousness integrates with the investigative, 'hermeneutic drive' of the hard-boiled noir film (1991: 1). In these works, popular genre is the primary organising rationale that enables critical understanding of violent femininity.

Whilst research on the violent woman in cinema is indeed extensive, this scholarship dwells predominantly on questions of genre or popular culture. The body of work on violent women in art or avant-garde cinema is comparatively limited and tends to focus on two key case studies – Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and Marleen Gorris's *De stilte rond Christine M.* (English title *A Question of Silence*; 1982). Akerman's celebrated film centres on the highly routinised life of a Belgian housewife who works as a prostitute to support herself and her teenage son; the film concludes when she murders one of her clients after intercourse. Gorris's *A Question of Silence* concerns three women who beat a storekeeper to death when he accuses one of them of shoplifting. Critics who analyse these films frequently attribute the protagonists' violence to a broader feminist impetus. Anneke Smelik and Linda Williams argue that the murder in *A Question of Silence* communicates the protagonists' outrage and desperation, dramatically attesting to patriarchal culture's stultifying effects upon women (Smelik 1998: 92; Williams 1988: 110). The murder scene in *Jeanne Dielman* has also been read in this way, although its meaning is more contentious (Jayne Loader, for instance, suggests that the act of violence that concludes the narrative is not feminist but, rather, rehashes a patriarchal tale of 'regeneration through violence' [1985: 328]). These scholars conceptualise women's violence as indicative of a mode of existence that arises from living as a woman in a phallocentric,

patriarchal society. Violence has a metaphoric function, gesturing towards the specificity of women's experience in a culture that elides female subjectivity. This begs the question, however, of how more contemporary 'art' cinemas negotiate women's acts of homicide.

Before embarking on such an analysis, it is necessary to first describe how I intend to categorise the films under consideration in this book. *Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema* examines a diverse grouping that extends from European art films *Antichrist* and *Trouble Every Day*, to hard-core road movie *Baise-moi*, to adolescent drama *Heavenly Creatures*, to the independent biopic *Monster*, to literary adaptation *The Reader*. To borrow David Bordwell's acknowledgement in his important essay on art cinema: 'It may seem perverse to propose that films produced in such various cultural contexts might share fundamentally similar features' (1979: 56). Yet there are a number of persistent thematic concerns and reading protocols associated with these films that both impact upon and underpin their construction of female violence.

Women's violence and filmic taste-categories

In addition to asking 'why' women commit violence, the films in this book are united by their shared 'status' – their aura of artistic merit or dramatic quality – in comparison to the majority of films that feature female violence. A survey of the violent woman in cinema shows that she appears prolifically in 'low' cultural forms such as exploitation cinema (*Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* [Russ Meyer, 1965], *I Spit on Your Grave* [Meir Zarchi, 1978] and *The Woman* [Lucky McKee, 2011]); popular horror (*Captive Wild Woman* [Edward Dmytryk, 1943], *The Vampire Lovers* [Roy Ward Baker, 1970] and *The Brood* [David Cronenberg, 1979]); and thrillers (*Double Indemnity* [Billy Wilder, 1944] and *The Maltese Falcon* [John Huston, 1941]). By the liberal, upper-middle-class taste-economies that exert power in global film criticism, the texts examined in this book possess an elevated status in comparison to these films and their heroines. To use Michael Z. Newman's phrasing, their 'identity begins with a negative: these films are not of the Hollywood studios and the megaplexes where they screen' (2011: 2). *Trouble Every Day* and *Antichrist*, for example, both premiered at the Cannes International Film Festival; the lead actresses of *Monster* and *The Reader* both won major industry awards, including the Academy Award and Golden Globe for Best Actress; and *Baise-moi* was legitimised as serious art by critics who protested the film's censorship. These texts therefore circulate in ways that create what Geoff King calls an 'impression of

difference, distinction and superiority', particularly in comparison to the oft-sensational genres that feature female killers and aggressors (2009: 12). The aim of *Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema*, therefore, is to consider this distinction. It approaches its six case studies in terms of how their shared status inflects the violent woman onscreen.

Taste and value, however, are not easily measured qualities. To begin with, value is not an inherent property of a film text; rather, it is bestowed by authorities and commentators through the sanctioning practices of film exhibition (such as screening at festivals) and criticism (through reviews, awards and critics' polls). As taste-categories, 'art' and 'quality' are therefore formed rather than discovered. This being the case, ideas of film art are susceptible to the changing ways critics appraise films. Moreover, contemporary film culture hosts multiple regimes of taste and, therefore, multiple ideas of what constitutes a quality film.[3] The notions of 'high' art cinema and 'low' popular culture are thus ephemeral concepts that frequently elude attempts to delineate their stylistic boundaries. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover comment that the 'art cinema' designation 'can be an unreliable label' because it intersects with so many different film modes and genres (2010: 3). Carol Clover argues that demarcating different strata of culture is 'intellectually unjustifiable' because 'the traffic between low and high is such that it is unnatural to separate them' (1992: 5). This point is well taken. As the chapters in this book observe, films that are critically positioned as 'art' cinema frequently share themes with texts that are commonly categorised as 'low' or 'popular'. For instance, *Antichrist* recalls the gore-filled 'body horror' film *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979) in its dramatisation of a woman driven to violence by the traumas of motherhood; *Trouble Every Day* resembles the *Species* franchise (Roger Donaldson, 1995; Peter Medak, 1998; Brad Turner, 2004) in its interest in the danger of women's 'animalistic' impulses (both sexual and aggressive); *Baise-moi* borrows imagery from both hard-core pornography and revenge films such as *Ms .45* (Abel Ferrara, 1981) and *A Gun for Jennifer* (Todd Morris, 1997). A clear distinction between 'art' and 'popular' cinema is thus not easily achieved.

This said, ideas of 'art' and 'quality' exist as influential norms of a dynamic and context-dependent kind against which viewers judge texts in the historical world. As David Andrews explains, terms like 'art cinema' 'define cinematic value in context-specific ways'; they are 'differential categories that classifiers use to carve out and sustain comparative forms of value' (2013: x). A consideration of these norms and their effect upon the filmic production of gender provides an opportunity to

gain a new perspective on the pleasures and functions of violent women in contemporary cinema. Indeed, in recent years, some critics have begun to notice violent women appearing outside their usual popular film milieu. In a short article for *Sight & Sound* in 2009, Amy Taubin observed that the Cannes International Film Festival programme was profligate with subversive women that year. She writes:

> On screen, actresses exuberantly seized opportunities to breach social convention and, in some cases, play havoc with their own public images. They gleefully embraced madness (Charlotte Gainsbourg in Lars von Trier's 'Antichrist'), fought back when expediently imprisoned for that same state of mind (Giovanna Mezzogiorno as the inconvenient first wife of Mussolini in Marco Bellocchio's 'Vincere'), displayed an unseemly, indeed psychotic absence of boundaries between themselves and their offspring (Kirn Hye-ja in Bong Joon-ho's 'Mother') and with lip-smacking relish, literally sucked dry the oppressor (Kim Ok-vin in Park Chan-wook's 'Thirst'). (2009: 23)

In the same issue, J. Hoberman describes Cannes that year as a 'Festival of Filth' because of the amount of violent content on the programme (2009: 21). The assumption underpinning such statements is that the setting of Cannes is incongruous with filmic representations of female violence, thus indicating their separate place in film culture.

In order to posit a workable concept of 'art' and 'quality' cinema as a norm and taste-formation, this book refers to a culturally dominant conception of cinematic value associated with affluent, liberal and educated middle and upper-middle classes in Western nations, a formation that Jeffrey Sconce calls the 'reigning aesthetic discourses on movie art' (1995: 374). This 'reigning' discourse consists of a networked set of exhibition sites, production practices and media publications that exist in the historical world, as well as an associated set of critical expectations and interpretive practices. Its exhibition sites include the major North American film festivals and international film festivals accredited by the *Fédération Internationale des Associations de Producteurs de Films* (FIAPF),[4] the urban centres of Western Europe, North America and Australasia, specialty cinemas and art-house exhibition venues. Its channels include urban middle- and upper-middle-class print media (such as the *New York Times* in the United States, the *Australian* and the *Age* in Australia, and the *Guardian* in the United Kingdom) and specialty film magazines such as *Sight & Sound* and *Film Comment*. Its meaning is consolidated in specialty film magazine annual lists and critics' polls, industry awards like

the Academy and Golden Globe Awards in the United States, and the various festival jury prizes at the Venice, Berlin, Cannes and Sundance film festivals. Taste-cultures also come into place via the discursive acts of film reviewing and criticism, which operate as stratifying acts of appraisal that mark out 'high' from 'low' culture. In undertaking such work, critics play a central role in determining the criteria by which cinema is categorised and assessed.

The films under consideration in this book are networked to this upper-middle-class urban taste-culture in multiple ways; the legitimacy of *The Reader*, for instance, was constructed in part via the marketing strategy of its distributor, The Weinstein Company, which exhibited the film at international writers' festivals, whereas texts such as *Antichrist*, *Trouble Every Day* and *Heavenly Creatures* earned cachet by touring the international festival circuit. What also unites the films in this book, however, is their association with a set of viewing procedures, expectations and pleasures linked to the taste-preferences expressed via the sites and institutions mentioned above. To use Steve Neale's words, they share a 'system of expectation and hypothesis' (1990: 46). For the purposes of this book, the system I am interested in exploring is the relationship such cinemas are anticipated to have with respect to subjectivity and its onscreen expression. There is a persistent view articulated in film criticism of the past two decades that the best kind of cinema initiates an edifying, hermeneutic form of engagement with the human subject. In order to fully appreciate this expectation, it is necessary to first trace its aetiologies to the centuries-old concept of 'aesthetic distance'. As Sarah Cardwell summarises, the aesthetic experience has been theorised as self-conscious contemplation of an artwork: 'a heightened alertness to the formal, sensory and "design" qualities of the artwork under scrutiny . . . "disinterested" pleasure, contrasted with other (e.g. sensuous) pleasures . . . a sense of elevated engagement' (2013: 33). The attitude that 'art' must be pondered to be appreciated also appears in relatively contemporary academic accounts of cinema. For example, Dudley Andrew defines art cinema by its ability to stimulate interpretation practices amongst audiences. Such texts, he argues, break the usual stylistic codes of popular film in order to encourage spectators to adopt new reading strategies (1984: 5–6).[5]

These conceptualisations suggest that appreciative forms of viewing engagement should be focused upon an artwork's textual qualities, such as innovations of style that break with 'invisible' or 'classical' conventions. However, critics responsible for delineating cinematic taste-categories do not base their assessments upon a film's stylistic qualities

alone. Art films, independent dramas and quality films are regularly praised for their capacity to provide insight into the human subject. Filmic meditations on the nature of 'the human', narrative attentiveness to psychological complexity and a willingness to hypothesise subjectivity via the mechanisms of style are repeatedly upheld as indicators of an intelligent, worthy text in the dominant discourses of 'legitimate' film culture (although critics almost never declare this value in such specific terms). Such assessments appear, for instance, in Bordwell's canonical account of European art cinema, a cohort which, he argues, purports to represent 'real problems (contemporary "alienation", "lack of communication", etc.)' (1979: 57). It also surfaces more recently in Sconce's account of American 'smart cinema' – a contemporary form evolved in part from the European art film – a mode that attains its aura of intelligence in part from its incisive focus on human relationships (2006: 434–5).[6] These values also appear in positive assessments of the films in this book. Stella Bruzzi, for instance, describes *Heavenly Creatures* as 'a beautifully choreographed descent into the world of the personal' (1995: 45); Desson Howe claims it 'has the unsettling appearance of having been created by the girls themselves' and is 'pathologically autobiographical' (1994: n.p.); Janet Maslin says that it shows 'an insular, volatile world of high-hormone adolescence' (1994: n.p.). As these comments suggest, the construction of the value of *Heavenly Creatures* centres on its perceived capacity to explore the protagonists' interiority via the mechanisms of narrative and style. Moreover, the supposed value of films that consider the intricacies of personhood also enlists a second 'expectation' or form of engagement from the cinema spectator: a pleasure in and desire for knowledge, or 'epistemophilia', in relation to the subject onscreen.

In addition to their industrial and critical construction as quality texts, the films considered in *Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema* are also united by their foregrounding of the violent woman's personhood for the spectator's pleasure in ways expected of art and 'quality' texts. From the confrontational *Baise-moi* to the melodramatic *Monster*, the pleasure of women's violence in these films centres on their exploration of her mode of being – in other words, their filmic expression of her transgressive subjectivity. This differs from the ways scholars have discussed the pleasures of popular films about violent women, which are hypothesised to reside in the fantasies of empowerment she initiates (Schubart 2007: 42), her ability to terrify via her abjection or castrating potential (Creed 1993), or her capacity to provide both exciting and erotic visual spectacle (O'Day 2004). Although violent women in

rape-revenge, exploitation and horror cinema may indeed 'educate' a curious film scholar about the culture's unconscious desires or anxieties regarding women's aggression, I could find no critics who argue that the pleasure of these films consists of intellectual edification on matters of personhood. As the following chapters examine, all of the films considered in this book present the violent woman as a complicated individual, making her available for scrutiny and contemplation.

The violent woman as an enigma

I have posited that one way critical discourses elevate film texts above popular cinema is by associating such texts with a structuring curiosity – a 'desire-for-knowledge' and hermeneutic pleasure – that centres on the human subject. Such questioning intersects with a broader characterisation of aggressive women as problematic and intriguing figures. In their analyses of cultural narratives, for instance, Sjoberg, Gentry and Belinda Morrissey all observe that female murderers are 'othered' as a means of dealing with the challenge they make to gender norms. In their investigation of media accounts about women who kill, Sjoberg and Gentry note that contemporary cultural discourses 'have fully othered the violent woman' by constructing them as biological or psychological oddities: such women 'are not women at all, but singular mistakes and freak accidents' (2007: 13). In her examination of legal discourses, Morrissey argues that prosecutors do not allow for the possibility of female violence, instead characterising women who kill as victims of circumstance rather than possessing a capacity for aggression. For Morrissey, this reveals 'the exclusionary operation of discursive identity formation' which cannot conceive of women as anything other than passive victims of violence (2003: 3). In such conceptions, the notions of the 'subject' and the 'Other' that these scholars use refer to personhood as an effect of structure; that is to say, the subject (and by implication the violent woman) is not an essential being but is produced by the systems and actions of language known as discourse. Such systems and actions, for Sjoberg, Gentry and Morrissey, disallow female violence, framing it as an unnatural phenomenon.

The tendency to position female violence as exceptional arises frequently in media accounts of women accused of murder. In such narratives, this 'othering' takes the form of commentary about the violent woman's inscrutability. For example, in a 2010 article on Australian woman Keli Lane, who was then accused of the murder of her infant daughter, journalist Michael Duffy compares her facial expressions to

that of Leonardo da Vinci's famously enigmatic *Mona Lisa* (2010: 7). American woman Casey Anthony, who in 2011 was acquitted of murdering her daughter Caylee, was described by journalist John Cloud as an 'enthusiastic' and 'fantastic' liar (2011: n.p.). Carlo Pacelli, a lawyer for the co-accused in the trial of Amanda Knox for the murder of Meredith Kercher in 2007, described Knox as 'a sorceress of deceit' with a 'face like a naïve doll' (cited in Follain 2011: 62). Such reports represent the violent woman as an inscrutable or shape-shifting figure who is defined by mystery and elusiveness.

With this in mind, theorists working within psychoanalytic paradigms have long argued that the classic cinema enacts this kind of structural elision or othering of female subjectivity in its compositions. This issue has significance for the matter of the violent woman's representation in particular. Laura Mulvey's foundational work on visual pleasure, for instance, posits that masculine subjectivity (particularly the psychic drive of scopophilia) is the key organising structure of both classic filmic narrative and visual representation. Mary Ann Doane builds on these ideas in her discussion of film noir and Expressionist cinema, wherein she argues that the noir genre – by way of its narratives, its visual aesthetic and its inscription of sexual difference in spectatorship – positions women as the Other to masculine characters *and* the masculine subjectivity inscribed in the film apparatus. Doane suggests that one way that this structural othering occurs is through a narrative and aesthetic construction of women as esoteric. Doane describes this as a 'tendency' reflected in broader Western phallocentric discourses 'to specify the woman's position in relation to knowledge to that of the enigma' – specifically, the well-known cultural cliché of describing women as mysterious and incomprehensible creatures (1991: 45). Referring to Sigmund Freud's lectures on female subjectivity, Doane argues that the hieroglyph is a useful metaphor for such representations of femininity. Hieroglyphics, she explains, are at once mysterious, an 'indecipherable language', and also a purely iconic image reflecting women's objectification – their to-be-looked-at-ness – in cinema (1991: 18) (original emphasis). She writes, 'the image of hieroglyphics strengthens the association made between femininity and the enigmatic, the undecipherable, that which is "other"' (1991: 17). Women's otherness is therefore an epistemological condition of being unexplained or unaccounted for – the position of the enigma (indeed, Freud famously posited another such metaphor with his description of the female as a 'dark continent',[7] a concept that Irigaray also alluded to in *This Sex Which Is Not One* by describing the construction of

femininity as a '*nothing to see*' [1985: 26] [original emphasis]). Women are not afforded the status of subject in Western phallocentric knowledge regimes; hence, they become unknowable Others who are closely associated with mystery. For Doane, the paradigmatic expression of this in film culture is the figure of the duplicitous *femme fatale*, a female character who is unpredictable and 'never what she appears to be' (1991: 1). Her origins, however, are older than cinema, extending to the female Sphinx of Thebes, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's titular vampire *Carmilla* (1871) and the sorceress Ayesha of H. Rider Haggard's *She: A History of Adventure* (1887).

This tendency to characterise femininity as an enigma has not gone uncriticised. In her recent rethinking of film noir, for instance, Julie Grossman notes that the conceptualisation of the *femme fatale* as unknowable overlooks the oft-complex representations of women in the genre: 'the opaque powerful woman persists in objectifying female experience,' she writes, because 'the "femme fatale" is a symbol of fears about absolute female power, not a representation of complex female experience . . . which is often present in connection with film noir's women' (2009: 5). In addition, violent men are also occasionally presented as enigmatic or Other. Count Dracula as he appears in his many filmic iterations, for example, can certainly be read as enigmatic: he is a seducer like the *femme fatale*, a shape-shifter and an aggressive predator in the guise of an aristocrat. As such, he, too, is an entity that is 'not what he initially appears to be'. *The Talented Mr Ripley* (Anthony Minghella, 1999), *In the Cut* (Jane Campion, 2003) and *The Killer Inside Me* (Michael Winterbottom, 2010) also feature dangerous *hommes fatals* who manipulate or elude those around them. That said, the association between femininity and mystery is culturally pervasive to the point where it becomes a dominant framework or reference point for women's violence. Indeed, while Grossman criticises the insistent figuring of the *femme fatale* as an enigma, the fact that this has been a historically prevalent way of thinking about women in film noir indicates that the enigma has a powerful cultural existence as a concept. Moreover, the framing of violent women as mysterious is not exclusive to film scholars or psychoanalytic theorists; media accounts of Lane, Anthony and Knox's respective trials also demonstrate the culture's tendency to conceptualise women's violence, and often femininity more generally, as an elusive phenomenon.

A key issue at stake in films that depict the homicidal woman is therefore how they respond to her construction as 'an epistemological trauma' or mystery. The characterisation of the violent woman as a

problem in need of resolution meshes with the expectation that art and 'quality' cinema will explore the intricacies of human personhood for the spectator's pleasure. Such a correlation is evident in the case studies in this book. *Antichrist*, *Trouble Every Day*, *Baise-moi*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Monster* and *The Reader* all evoke the figure of the enigma by interrogating the violent woman's behaviour and personhood. Consequently, in spite of being regularly framed as a titillating or sensible thrill in films like *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (Nathan H. Juran, 1958), *The Big Doll House* (Jack Hill, 1971) or *Bitch Slap* (Rick Jacobson, 2009), the violent woman is in fact thematically well suited to contemporary cinemas of distinction. The 'problem' of women's homicidal inclination intersects with the expectations surrounding films that derive value from their exploration of human complexity. This book therefore examines how each film attempts to make women's violent personhood intelligible or, at the very least, interrogate how her mystery has been formed.

Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema

Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema is an exploratory book. Its goal is to extend critical understanding of the violent woman by examining how films circulating within urban, upper-middle-class taste-categories produce this figure onscreen. Specifically, the chapters that follow analyse the different ways that cinema can respond – via narrative discourse, stylistic arrangements or experiential dimensions – to the 'problem' of transgressive female subjectivity. The films under consideration herein are heterogeneous in style and aesthetic: for instance, Coralie Trinh Thi and Virginie Despentes's low-budget, hyper-violent film *Baise-moi* bears little resemblance in its look or tone to Stephen Daldry's polished drama *The Reader*; likewise, the melancholic eroticism of *Trouble Every Day* contrasts dramatically with the earnest romanticism of *Heavenly Creatures*. In acknowledgement of this diversity, the following chapters remain sensitive to the diverging strategies that these films use for imagining violent femininity onscreen: some films examined herein draw upon the expressive power of an established mode – such as melodrama in *Monster* or romance in *Heavenly Creatures* – to construct the violent woman as a complex subject who is motivated by emotion. Others, such as *Baise-moi* and *Trouble Every Day*, break with normative film style, using distinct aesthetic strategies to disrupt the subject positions of 'self' and 'Other', masculinity and femininity, inscribed in the film-viewing experience. The book's uniting concern is to highlight that these films' appeal is centred on the exploration of the violent female

subject. As Neroni writes, present-day culture is marked by an inability 'to comprehend the complexities of femininity as an identity that includes violence' (2005: 161). I argue that the films examined in this book not only encourage the spectator to consciously engage with such complexities; they also present this engagement as a central viewing pleasure for the spectator.

This book is organised around an analyses of six texts. It adopts a contemporary focus, examining films produced within the past twenty years: the oldest text under consideration is *Heavenly Creatures*, released in 1994, and the most recent is Lars von Trier's 2009 film *Antichrist*. References to earlier texts are an essential component of my analysis; however, an emphasis on recent examples allows me to explore the variations between different films in the selected time period (rather than, for example, documenting changes in the depiction of the violent woman over time). Each chapter engages with a key issue attached to women's violence in cultural narratives. Chapter 1 examines the conundrum posed by feminine madness and hysteria in *Antichrist*. Chapter 2 considers the filmic tradition of the monstrous woman as a scientific oddity, analysing how this trope is mobilised in *Trouble Every Day*. Chapter 3 attends to the imbrication of women's violence with their sexuality in *Baise-moi*, looking specifically at how explicit representations of heterosexual sex articulate the violent protagonists' experience. Chapter 4 examines how the esoteric 'secret' of lesbian subjectivity is addressed in *Heavenly Creatures*. Chapter 5 considers how the female murderer is treated in the biographical film *Monster*. Lastly, Chapter 6 examines questions of women's culpability through the figure of the female Nazi in *The Reader*. By considering a diverse range of relatively contemporaneous films, this book can reflect the heterogeneity of the representations of women's violence in present-day cinema.

Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema also takes a Western focus. Although my analysis mentions some films from Asian cinemas – such as *Ôdishon* and *Dream Home* (Pang Ho-Cheung, 2010) – the major case studies examined herein originate from Australasia, North America and Western Europe. This is not because there are no examples of violent women in other national cinemas – quite the contrary. In addition to the two examples above, Shekhar Kapur's biographical film *Bandit Queen* (1994), Ang Lee's 'art-*wuxia*' *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and Park Chan-wook's festival hit *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005) are all films from Asian nations that are marked with a degree of art cinema distinction in Western contexts. Moreover, although these films hail from very different national cinemas and aesthetic traditions to the

texts that this book considers, the differences of style between Asian and Western European, Australasian and North American cinema are not necessarily insurmountable given the transnational aesthetic exchanges that occur in global film culture.[8] However, I do not incorporate Asian cinema into this investigation because the meanings of female violence differ depending on national context, an issue that would require special attention to avoid reifying cultural difference. In her analysis of the swordswomen of *wuxia* films, for example, L.S. Kim cautions against conflating violent Asian heroines with their Western counterparts. In their native Chinese context, Kim argues, such women are 'simultaneously heroic and traditional'; martial arts is an expression of traditional 'Chinese values and culture' and therefore not totally incompatible with cultural expectations of women (2006: n.p.). It would therefore be imprecise to characterise the female *wuxia* protagonist as subversive in the same way as Western action heroines. In addition, this book refers to specifically Western conceptions of femininity: it includes ideas advanced by classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, reiterated in modern history by physicians such as Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud, and articulated in Anglophonic media accounts of violent women, such as those surrounding Casey Anthony, Amanda Knox and Keli Lane. A consideration of transcultural notions of gender is beyond the scope of this book but would be a pertinent avenue of enquiry for future studies.

By undertaking an investigation of homicidal women in critically distinguished films, this book seeks to advance understanding of violent women in cinema. Female aggressors are confounding figures who undermine a key point of distinction between masculine and feminine subjectivity: the capacity and inclination for physical aggression. In doing so, they excite progressive audiences by challenging hegemonic notions of female pacifism, but they also court controversy by shifting attention away from the statistically far more prevalent fact of male violence against women. Looking beyond popular genres can provide a more detailed understanding of cinema's engagement with this figure. As Claire Johnston reminds her readers in her influential essay 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema', art films are not free from the ideologies (or, I would add, the exigencies) that permeate popular culture (1999: 33). In keeping with this point, *Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema* investigates how art and 'quality' cinema engages with the subversive theme of women's aggression – it explores the creative solutions cinema poses to the problem of the violent female enigma.

1
Horror, Hysteria and Female Malaise: *Antichrist*

One of the key films to emerge in recent years about women's violence is Lars von Trier's controversial tale of marital discord, *Antichrist* (2009). Premiering at the 62nd Cannes International Film Festival, the film follows an unnamed couple, the Man (Willem Dafoe) and the Woman (Charlotte Gainsbourg), whose infant son, Nic, dies after falling from the high window of his nursery.[1] The Woman is so overwhelmed with grief and guilt following the accident that she suffers a nervous breakdown and eventually attacks her husband. Underpinned by the story of a woman's destabilising emotional malaise, *Antichrist* recalls several horror films that link women's violence with madness and maternity, particularly *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979), *À l'intérieur* (Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury, 2008), and more recent texts *Proxy* (Zack Parker, 2013) and *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014).

Antichrist occupies a provocative position in contemporary filmic taste cultures. On one hand, the film contains graphic scenes of violence, mutilation and torture reminiscent of the horror genre: the Woman, for instance, bludgeons her husband's genitals and mutilates her own with a pair of shears. Combined with the film's supernatural moments, such sequences reportedly caused Cannes audiences to jeer, laugh and faint during the film's screening (Badley 2010: 141–2). On the other, however, *Antichrist* also circulates in ways that characterise it as an art film. The film premiered in competition at the prestigious Cannes Festival, where von Trier had already forged a reputation as an accomplished (albeit polarising) auteur. In 1991, von Trier received three Cannes prizes for his film *Europa* (1991) and was awarded the *Palme d'Or* for *Dancer in the Dark* in 2000. Moreover, due to its combination of 'low' culture iconography with a 'high' cultural setting (or, more accurately, what is constructed in the discourses of film criticism as 'high' and

'low'), scholars have identified *Antichrist* as part of the 'new extremity': a much-discussed category of art cinema that emerged on the European festival circuit in the late 1990s. In a widely cited article for *Artforum*, James Quandt coined the term 'New French Extremity' to describe 'a growing vogue for shock tactics in French cinema' (2004: 127). Quandt pointed in particular to the explicit sexual content and violence in films such as *Romance* (Catherine Breillat, 1999), *Baise-moi* (Coralie Trinh Thi and Virginie Despentes, 2000) and *Twentynine Palms* (Bruno Dumont, 2003) as evidence of a filmmaking trend towards aesthetics borrowed from 'lower' cultural forms, particularly pornography and exploitation cinema. Commentators like Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall have since identified films from outside France, including the works of Ulrich Seidl, Lukas Moodysson, Michael Haneke and Lars von Trier, as also part of the new extremity (2011: 1). Nevertheless, *Antichrist* was received by many as a text that was incompatible with the Cannes Festival. Shortly after the film's premiere, for instance, critic Baz Bamigboye confronted von Trier, demanding that he 'explain and justify' his work.

Given its art-cinema cachet and its confronting representation of female aggression, *Antichrist* is an ideal case study with which to begin this book's investigation of the violent woman in critically distinguished film forms. The depiction of a violent, psychologically disturbed woman in *Antichrist* recalls the diagnosis of hysteria, a predominantly feminine disease of both the mind and body (although men have been diagnosed as hysterics at various points in medical history). The term originates from the Greek '*hystera*' meaning 'uterus', and one of the earliest accounts of a hysteria-like illness is found in Plato's *Timaeus*, in which he describes the disorder as the consequence of a distressed, 'unfruitful' uterus that moves around the body, obstructing respiration (2014: 132). *Antichrist* similarly links the female protagonist's aggression to her reproductive capacity insofar as her symptoms arise after the death of her only child. With reference to the film's combined art-horror modality, this chapter therefore examines how the female protagonist is produced as a violent hysteric who turns against her therapist husband.

As I signalled in the Introduction to this book, a focal point for this chapter (and the chapters that follow) is how *Antichrist* engages with the violent woman's cultural construction as an enigma. Filmic narratives frequently betray a specifically epistemological anxiety about the violent woman's subjectivity, positioning her as a 'problem' that must be solved: by foregrounding the Woman's debilitating grief and anxiety, *Antichrist* certainly constructs a scenario that positions her as a

mysterious entity. The commentary around *Antichrist* at the time of its release, however, shows that critics expected the film to demonstrate some kind of artistic insightfulness into the two protagonists' lives; instead, many commentators deemed *Antichrist* confused, even misogynistic, in its representation of the two protagonists.[2] This being the case, my analysis of the violent woman in *Antichrist* focuses on the interaction of the film's art-horror modality with its gender representations. I consider how the film deploys horror aesthetics and tropes to frustrate the spectator's desire for knowledge of the Woman: an epistemophilia elicited in the film's construction of her as an hysteric.

A mutual misunderstanding

The story of *Antichrist* is told in several parts. In the first section, the 'Prologue', the Man and Woman have sex together in their urban apartment. Caught in the passion of the moment, they fail to notice as their young son, Nic, escapes from his crib, crawls up to the window-sill of his nursery and falls to his death through the high window. In the film's first chapter – which an intertitle refers to as 'Chapter One: Grief' – the Woman is so disabled by heartache following Nic's death that she is admitted to hospital, where she stays for several weeks. Once she returns home, she suffers from panic attacks, intense sexual urges and bouts of crying. The intensity of her emotion compromises her relationship with her husband who, to complicate matters further, takes charge of her psychotherapy. The chapter therefore consists of several lengthy scenes in which the pair bicker over long-harboured resentments while ostensibly engaged in therapy. Angered by her husband's attention, the Woman declares: 'I never interested you until now that I'm your patient.' The Man responds by maintaining his cool professional demeanour, an act that only further irritates his wife.

In the second part – entitled 'Chapter Two: Pain (Chaos Reigns)' – the pair relocate to their woodlands cabin, suggestively called 'Eden', to undertake intensive counselling sessions. When they get there, however, a number of bizarre and supernatural events take place in the woods. Oak trees drop acorns from their branches in bizarre quantities; the woodland animals begin to speak; and human limbs emerge mysteriously from the soil. In 'Chapter Three: Despair (Gynocide)', the Man and Woman's arguments intensify as therapy progresses. Referring to her scholarly research on witchcraft, misogyny and 'gynocide' in medieval Europe, the Woman declares that the natural world is Satanic and evil. By extension, she reasons, so, too, is womankind. Shortly after

making this statement, the Woman attacks her husband. Although the Man initially attempts to flee, the Woman tearfully pursues him, bludgeons his genitals and attaches a large millstone to his leg to prevent his escape; she also castrates herself with a pair of scissors. The events reach their climax in 'Chapter Four: The Three Beggars'. After a prolonged struggle, and believing that there is no other way to escape, the Man strangles the Woman to death in rage and despair.

On one hand, this story of female psychological disturbance reinscribes a set of well-established – and problematic – ideas about violent femininity. As it is explained and performed in the film, the Woman's symptomatology strongly recalls the defunct medical diagnosis of hysteria. Rather than adhering to one single proponent's view of the malaise, however, the Woman performs a repertoire of symptoms that have, at various times, been associated with the illness in Western medical discourse. For example, her physical afflictions recall those described by Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud in their analysis of 'Anna O.', a patient featured in their book *Studies on Hysteria*; like Anna O., the Woman in *Antichrist* suffers from neuralgia, hallucinations and mood swings (1974: 74–81). The Woman's performance of these symptoms is also reminiscent of Jean-Martin Charcot's photographs of hysterics at the Sâlpetrière Hospital published in 1878–81, *Iconographie photographique de la Sâlpetrière*. In a scene shortly after the Woman returns home from hospital, for example, she experiences a nightmare and panic attack while lying in bed (a location where many of Charcot's hysterics were photographed). As she arches her body, her chest rises and falls rapidly, mimicking the 'hysterical seizure' or '*grande hystérie*', a full-body episode that supposedly resembles both childbirth and orgasm (Showalter 1993: 287) (Figure 1.1). During the sequence, a montage of her symptoms appears onscreen: a dilated pupil, a palpitating chest and twitching fingers. Dark and blurred at the peripheries with an ominous drone rumbling over the soundtrack, this montage not only directly presents the symptoms of the Woman's hysteria for the viewer's attention, but also adopts a hysterical aesthetic, simulating the 'disturbances of vision' and aural hallucinations that Breuer and Freud describe (1974: 74).

Precisely by referencing hysteria so strongly in the plot and mise-en-scène, however, *Antichrist* in fact engages in a critique of the subjectifying medical power that the Man wields over the Woman. Although the film rearticulates a 'mad' or 'bad' cultural narrative of female violence – a formulation that imagines women's aggression as a product of either her intrinsic evil or insanity (Morrissey 2003: 33) – it is also highly concerned with problematising masculine authority. As Larry Gross suggests, 'von

Figure 1.1 The Woman experiences a panic attack; *Antichrist* (2009)

Trier doesn't have a problem with women. He has, on the other hand, a serious problem with men' (2009: 42). Through the Woman's fate, the film dramatises the precise point made by psychiatrist Eliot Slater in his essay on hysteria's therapeutic deficiencies. Far from being a true medical condition, Slater writes, hysteria has always indicated an analyst's *lack* of medical knowledge. 'In the main,' Slater writes, 'the diagnosis of "hysteria" applies to a disorder of the doctor-patient relationship. It is evidence of non-communication, of a mutual misunderstanding' (1982: 40). Such misunderstanding is a central theme in the plot of *Antichrist*. The narrative insistently focuses on the Man's inability to comprehend his wife's experience, an incompetence that the film expresses on a narrative level. In spite of his initial belief to the contrary, the Man is never able to determine the true cause of the Woman's affliction. First the Woman tells him that she is afraid of the forest; hence, the Man surmises that his wife's fear is caused by 'nature'. Then, when the Woman declares that 'nature is Satan's church', the Man revises his initial hypothesis, deciding that it is Satan, not nature, which terrifies her. Finally, the Man concludes that the Woman's greatest fear is herself, although the Woman attacks him before he can explore the implications of this revelation. These events certainly suggest a disorder of the doctor-patient relationship. Confused and enraged, the Man strangles the Woman to death, thereby permanently eliminating the threat she poses to his life and his authority as an analyst.

By so strongly emphasising the 'disordered' doctor-patient relationship, *Antichrist* uses the figure of the feminine hysteric to foreground the oppressiveness, and limits, of masculine knowledge (rather than, for example, femininity's horror). This strategy is not unproblematic,

however. In ending so violently and with few conclusions about the 'true' cause of the woman's illness, *Antichrist* could be accused of ultimately representing the violent, hysterical woman as an unsolvable enigma – an unresolved conundrum with which to undermine masculine authority. The short 'Epilogue', for example, seems to construct femininity as a mysterious phenomenon. As the Man walks alone and injured through the forest at Eden, dozens of women appear suddenly from behind the grassy foothills. Their faces are blurred, leaving the Man to watch confusedly as the group marches deeper into the forest. Thus stripped of their individuality, these women seem to symbolise a supernatural or possibly even malevolent force of femininity, just as the Woman claimed. However, the image of the Man standing mystified as the women swarm around him foregrounds his ignorance. Male misunderstanding, rather than the horror of femininity, is the point that concludes *Antichrist*.

Horror, drama and generic provocation

Antichrist also undertakes several formal manoeuvres that position violent femininity as an expressive tool for critiquing male power. The first of these is its combination of 'art' cinema themes with horror-film tropes. In an article written shortly after the premiere of *Antichrist* at Cannes in May 2009, Larry Gross describes von Trier's film as a confused text that poses an uncertain depiction of female subjectivity. According to Gross, this is due to the film's inability to conform to either the tenets of dramatic realism or horror film:

> *Antichrist* is both inspired and disabled by von Trier's ambition to link a psychodramatic art film to a horror movie. And this boils down to the film's evasive uncertainty about whether to represent [the female protagonist] as a case of psychological trauma or an incarnation of mythic evil. (2009: 44)

Like Gross, many other reviewers saw the film's turn to supernatural events, and the violence that accompanied it, as having problematic implications for the film's depiction of femininity. Mette Hjort argued that the film's enactment, at its conclusion, of 'extreme misogyny' – such as the gruesome female castration and scenes of spousal violence – was not adequately justified by von Trier's artistic 'prerogative' to challenge his audience (2011: n.p.). Other reviewers criticised the film's apparent lack of a clear meaning or message. Catherine Wheatley claims

that *Antichrist* is 'littered with opaque symbolism' (2009: n.p.); Scott Foundas states that it is a 'juvenile, knee-jerk provocation'; whereas Todd McCarthy found it unsophisticated, describing *Antichrist* as 'a big fat art-film fart' (2009a: 16). Foundas and Wheatley also interpreted the generic twist as a sign that von Trier intended to ridicule his audience. Foundas declared that the director was 'taking the piss' and Wheatley argued that *Antichrist* amounted to 'a supremely intelligent act of bad faith, directed with deliberate vitriol at the middle-class audiences whose relationship with the director and his films has always been so bitterly wrought with conflict' (2009: n.p.). According to Wheatley's hypothesis, *Antichrist* is a hoax designed to mock the pretensions of its art cinema audience.

Whether the film's generic duality is due to directorial overreach or 'juvenile' provocation, the shift in narrative logic in *Antichrist* has implications for its representation of the Woman's violent hysteria. As I indicated in the Introduction to this book, prevailing constructions of contemporary 'art' cinema encourage specific modes of appreciation; critical emphasis on characterisation and *la condition humaine* frequently turns the spectator's enquiring gaze upon the human subject. *Antichrist* invites precisely this kind of engagement; provocatively, however, it reneges on the viewing pleasure that it promises in its early chapters. After Nic falls to his death, the Woman's deep depression becomes a plot event that requires resolution; it is the puzzle that organises the narrative. The spectacle and narrative fact of her grief encourage spectators to scrutinise her symptoms for clues regarding the nature of her malaise and to participate in her diagnosis, casting the Woman in the role of hysteric and the onlooker as analyst. A series of intense physical spectacles in the early parts of *Antichrist* reinforce this positioning: the Woman suffers panic attacks, hyperventilates, and, in one scene, beats her head against the edge of a porcelain toilet bowl. The Woman – her emotions and her subjectivity – becomes the enigma that initiates the narrative and positions the viewers in a state of non-knowledge about the woman onscreen. Moreover, the dialogue in these scenes invokes the discourse of psychology as a basis for understanding her behaviour. The Man insists that the Woman's grief is 'not a disease' but 'a natural, healthy reaction' and encourages her to explore her emotions. The Man is clearly overconfident in his approach; he superciliously brandishes his wife's medication and insists that she return home from hospital. Yet his words signal that the Woman's malady can be made intelligible according to the principles of psychological motivation and causality. In keeping with David Bordwell's description of the art-film text, *Antichrist* is initially established as a film interested

in the human condition, a film 'of psychological effects in search of their causes' (1979: 58). The exposition thus suggests that *Antichrist* will provide some resolution to the Woman's affect. It creates the desire for insight about her overwhelming grief and, at the same time, about her fraught relationship with her husband.

The film's conclusion spectacularly disappoints these expectations. Rather than maintaining a characterisation of the Woman's violence as having its aetiology solely in psychological distress, the plot events of *Antichrist* pose a second possibility: that her behaviour is attributable to her inherent and supernatural feminine evil. The mysterious events that occur midway through *Antichrist* enact a generic shift away from psychological realism towards a regime of verisimilitude more appropriate to horror cinema. Once the Man and Woman arrive at their cabin in woods, for example, ominous events begin to occur in the forest that seem incongruous alongside the themes of grief and psychotherapy set up in the exposition. During a fraught sexual encounter between the Man and Woman in the woods, a tangle of arms and legs emerges from the root system of a large tree. In addition, in one of the most notorious scenes of the film, the Man comes across a fox cannibalising itself who tells him that 'chaos reigns'. As if in accord with the disquieted forest around her, the Woman becomes increasingly agitated. She tells her husband that women's bodies are under the control of evil natural forces; later, in accordance with her description, she subjects her husband to diabolical tortures, crushing his genitals and driving a heavy bolt through his leg. The film's aesthetic also changes from *verité*-style realism to a dynamic, hyper-colourised style, and the soundtrack fills with ominous drones, scratches and screams to create a sense of psychological disturbance.

In its transformation from a meditation on the effects of grief on a woman's mental state to a fatal spousal conflict with supernatural overtones, *Antichrist* can be understood as a psychodramatic art film that *becomes* a horror film. By aesthetically repositioning itself to conform to horror narrative tropes, *Antichrist* effects a change in 'generic verisimilitude': what is 'likely to occur' given the film's textual and contextual qualities as an art-film drama (Neale 1990: 47, 46). This shift sees the film dispense with a clear psychological rationale for the Woman's hysteria and instead insinuate that her behaviour is attributable to intrinsic evil. The tacit suggestion that supernatural entities are implicated in her actions is consistent with the popular horror genre's regimes of verisimilitude: witches, demons and evil entities surface repeatedly in horror films of varying pedigree, from the commercially

and critically successful films *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) and *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), to recent low-budget indie projects such as *The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007). Yet, even as these supernatural narrative events enact a shift that enables the film to become consistent with the horror genre, some reviewers, as I have noted, found the supernatural turn within *Antichrist* very incongruous. Gross suggests that it betrays the film's 'uncertainty' (2009: 44), whereas McCarthy simply calls the film 'ridiculous' (2009b: 4).

The sense of 'bad faith' that Wheatley describes – that is, the feeling that *Antichrist* misrepresents itself as an introspective art film when it is in fact a horror text – can be attributed to what Rick Altman calls 'generic frustration: the emotion generated by a film's failure to respect generic norms' (1996: 280). By switching from the personal and psychological to an impersonal, supernatural causality, *Antichrist* frustrates the spectator's drive to interpret the Woman's violent outburst according to the tenets of psychological realism. In its depiction of a disordered doctor-patient relationship, the film instead entertains an extremely provocative (and, for many, ideologically unacceptable) explanation for the Woman's violence: namely, that it stems from her inherent feminine evil. This deliberate generic frustration amounts to a formal subversion of the spectator's gaze; the film invites, and then denies, the spectator's drive to reveal, uncover and unmask the woman. This provocation is aimed at the spectator in general; however, the plot particulars of *Antichrist* also characterise the drive for knowledge as an explicitly masculine mode of looking. In the context of the film, psychology is a male discourse that superciliously acts upon the Woman via her husband. By characterising femininity as mysterious and possibly even evil, *Antichrist* allows its female protagonist to evade the Man's – and the spectator's – subjectifying desire to account for her illness. Critiquing the spectator by invoking an extremely misogynistic (not to mention archaic) rationale for female violence is undoubtedly a problematic manoeuvre that contributed to the audience's outrage after the film's premiere at Cannes. Nevertheless, this is precisely the strategy that *Antichrist* adopts.

The visible and the knowable

The visual aesthetic of *Antichrist* also plays a central role in the film's provocation of its spectator and evasive inscription of violent femininity. *Antichrist* is a visually engrossing film – Wheatley suggests 'one of the most beautiful-looking films ever made' (2009: n.p.) – that switches

between sombre, dark scenes in the cabin at Eden and luminous fantasy sequences outside in the forest. Yet the film's visual regimes do not solely operate to provide aesthetic pleasure to the audience: they also play a key role in the frustration of the spectator's gaze and, therefore, the way female subjectivity is inscribed in the film. Since Laura Mulvey's treatise on visual pleasure provided a foundational account of the way that cinema positions women in relation to the psychic needs of the masculine spectator, the role of vision in the production of female subjectivity has been of interest to feminist scholars. Yet such regimes can also be described as driven by pleasure in knowledge. As I mentioned in the Introduction, narrative film frequently turns an investigative gaze upon women, positioning them as objects of a text's hermeneutic impulse. Mary Ann Doane argues that this kind of epistemophilic gaze is premised on the assumption that visibility has representational truth value: that 'the visible equals the knowable' (1991: 45). Film representation must therefore establish a direct correlation between the observable and truth. This intersects again with my contention that the discourses of art-film consumption foster a mode of reading characterised by interpretation and decoding. Niche cinema forms place exclusionary requirements upon their audience, demanding high levels of cultural competency in order to foster a pleasure in interpretation or reading (Sconce 2002: 352; King 2009: 2).

The visual aesthetic of *Antichrist* at first suggests that 'the visible' does indeed equal 'the knowable'. The early scenes of the film establish two cinematographic styles that visually signify the Woman's objective and subjective experience, thereby suggesting the possibility of interpreting the Woman's malaise and providing a kind of pleasure in knowledge associated with art cinema modes of spectatorship. The first is a hand-held style filmed on a Red One camera; the second is an intensely coloured style filmed on a high-speed Phantom camera (Silberg 2009: 67). At the beginning of the film, *Antichrist* uses a hand-held style to signify diegetic reality and high-speed footage to represent subjective reality, with the hand-held camera showing events occurring in real time and space and the high-speed camera depicting the Woman's fantasies or imaginings (cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle calls these scenes 'visualization sequences' [cited in Silberg 2009: 72]). The distinctiveness of the hand-held and high-speed camera styles serves to demarcate reality and fantasy. Like von Trier's earlier Dogme films, in which the hand-held camera became part of the filmmaker's rejection of film 'cosmetics' (a word that is etymologically associated with vision), the immediacy of the hand-held footage in *Antichrist* signifies a more truthful image

(von Trier 2003: 22). Indeed, the hand-held camera gives the spectator a powerful omniscience, allowing her or him to see the Woman's private, anguished moments as she languishes in bed or on the floor of her bathroom. In contrast, the high-speed sequences represent events occurring in the characters' imaginations. These images are steady, vividly colourised and extremely still. Both of these camera styles make the Woman available for the spectator's scrutiny: the hand-held enables an unfettered access, whereas the visualisation sequences render the Woman's psyche 'observable', thus empowering the spectator to inspect her mind as well as her body. Precisely because of their dreamlike, fantastical quality, these images reaffirm vision's positivist value.

The arrangement of visual signification that the film establishes in its early scenes collapses shortly after the Man and Woman arrive at Eden, a process that is signalled by the film's merging of its visual styles. High-speed sequences begin to represent the mundane world previously shown with the hand-held camera and the hand-held footage depicts events that contradict their realist aesthetic; put another way, it involves a 'slippage between vision and epistemological certitude' (Doane 1991: 43–4). During his first night in the woods, a visualisation sequence shows the Man standing outside the cabin as hundreds of acorns fall from the branches of a nearby oak tree (see Figure 1.2). It is not clear whether this event occurs in the objective world or is a fantasy; the image is vividly illuminated as if it is occurring in a dream, yet the shot that immediately precedes this moment, showing the Man inside the cabin looking out, is filmed in a realist style. Later, the visual regime is reversed when the hand-held camera shows a supernatural event in which a tangle of human arms and legs emerge from the oak's root system as the Man and Woman have sex beneath its branches. This stylistic change can be understood as part of the film's broader transitioning into the horror genre, wherein the demarcation between the fantastical and real worlds effectively collapses. This slippage or merging of indexical and fantastical representation reaches its climax at the film's conclusion. After the Man has killed the Woman and burned her body, the film cuts to an overhead image of the dead tree on the lawn. It is almost the exact same image from the Woman's fantasy earlier in the film, except that it now shows the Man walking away from the cabin on a makeshift crutch. As the Man walks past, dozens of female corpses materialise on the ground. Again, it is not clear whether this occurs in objective reality or in a fantasy. In these moments, the demarcation between the 'actual' world and the expressive depiction of the protagonists' mindscapes disintegrates.

Figure 1.2 Acorns fall during a high-speed sequence; *Antichrist* (2009)

The merging of visual styles in *Antichrist* has two interrelated effects. Firstly, the ambiguous reality of the scenes at Eden intensifies the film's portentous tone. The longer the Man and Woman stay in the woods, the more threatening Eden seems to become. Secondly, the destabilisation of vision in the film problematises the spectator's gaze. The merging of the two styles undermines the regimes of visual signification the film establishes in its early scenes. Such visual slippage troubles the spectator's ability to reliably observe the action: the visual instability produces epistemological uncertainty. This does not necessarily prevent the viewer from arriving at a personal conclusion about what she or he has seen. It is possible to interpret the film to mean that the malevolent forces in the woods at Eden truly do drive the Woman to violence. Yet the film includes a degree of uncertainty, thus compromising the spectator's position as masterful observer and interpreter of the events at Eden.

Examining the patient

One area of *Antichrist* where this unstable visual aesthetic has specific implications for the representation of female personhood is in the figuration of female subjectivity through the representation of the face. Faces are a key point of feminist interest and have attracted particular attention in scholarly accounts of the filmic production of female subjectivity via cinema's scopic regimes. As Doane remarks, the face is figured as '*the* instance of subjectivity' and 'the mark of individuality' (1991: 47) (original emphasis). Moreover, faces are a focal point for the

epistemophilic gaze – the face is 'the most *readable* space of the body', the most immediate signifier of emotion and unique identity, *as well as* a site that requires special interpretation on the part of the onlooker (Doane 1991: 47).

An examination of the treatment of the face in *Antichrist* can provide further insight into how the violent woman comes into place in this particular art-horror text. In keeping with Doane's descriptions, the intense focus on the face in the early scenes of *Antichrist* elevates the Woman – particularly her emotions – to the status of a narrative enigma to be solved. *Antichrist*'s early scenes position her face as a key focus of the spectator's intense visual scrutiny: after Nic's death, the Woman's face is highly available to the spectator's gaze as her hair is tightly pulled over her forehead at the funeral and, in the following scene at the hospital, her head lies propped up by white pillows. In these moments, the Woman's face hosts a range of affective intensities, such as lust, anguish and despair. The intense focus on the face in the early scenes of *Antichrist* is part of the film's elevation of the Woman and her subjectivity to the status of a narrative enigma to be solved. Faces in close-up function as surfaces where emotion, character psychology and motivation manifest.

In representing the face in this way, *Antichrist* also engenders the kind of subjectivity that the face is supposed to signify; namely, subjectivity characterised by interiority. If, as David Bordwell suggests, characters in art cinema search for the aetiologies of their emotions (1979: 58), spectators at the start of *Antichrist* are implicated in a process of connecting the expressions that manifest on the Woman's face with her interior psychic state. Although the face is a surface, it has also been described as having a special profundity linked to the subject's essential personhood; for instance, being described as 'a mirror of the soul' (Davis 2004: 25). Drawing upon the work of Susan Stewart, Doane also makes the argument that the face signifies depth: 'the face reveals a depth and profundity which the body itself is not capable of . . . Behind the appearance of the face and mouth lies the interior stripped of appearances' (1991: 47). The visual representation of the Woman's face in *Antichrist* suggests that it possesses a profundity of meaning – a subjectivity – available only to those who can decipher it. This occurs even in moments when the Woman's face is *not* directly available to the spectator. In the first chapter, the Woman's facial features are often in deep shadow or covered by her long hair. Such veiling creates a sense of visual closeness yet inaccessibility, 'provoking' and teasing the onlooker (Doane 1991: 49). This intensifies the hermeneutic drive of the gaze by aesthetically representing the face as a mystery.

Whereas *Antichrist* initially presents the Woman's face as a readable surface and, by extension, a means of making sense of her violent rage, her countenance transforms with the film's broader aesthetic regime shift from psychodramatic drama to horror film. After this shift, the Woman's face ceases to represent the profound subjectivity that it initially represented. By becoming a surface that shows only the lack of an interior, the Woman's face is unavailable to be read or scrutinised. Instead, the face becomes what I call a visage: an objectified likeness that indicates the terrifying absence of the soul rather than a hidden profundity. The Woman's face undergoes this transformation in the sequence where the Man brutally strangles his wife to death (although it is foreshadowed several times through a series of short, ghostly inserts that show the Woman screaming). Having suffered several gruesome injuries as a result of his wife's violent outburst, the Man lashes out in rage against the Woman, seizing her by the throat. The sequence shows the physical changes to the Woman's face as she dies: her face flushes as she loses consciousness and her eyes become cloudy. The ghastliness of the scene is underscored by the silence of the moment of her death: there is no sound except for the patter of acorns – already established as a sign of natural decay – to interrupt the quiet of the scene. This moment can be read in multiple ways. Firstly, this gruesome spousal murder can be understood as part of the film's enactment (or, as Julie Bindel argues, endorsement) of the misogyny explored in the narrative (cited in Brooks 2009). Secondly, the moment can be conceptualised as part of the horror genre's tendency to present spectacles of physical injury in ways that elicit shock, fear and disgust (Prince 2004: 244). Thirdly – and the reading that I emphasise – is that the scene sees the transformation of the Woman's living face, the 'instance of subjectivity', into the face of a non-subject (Doane 1991: 47). In her essay on abjection, Julia Kristeva considers the corpse to be a most abject object because it represents both personhood and non-personhood. She writes, 'The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life' (1982: 4). Indeed, the scene dramatises this precise process as the Woman slowly dies.

The film's aesthetic transformation of the Woman's face is part of its strategy to switch from drama to horror. By morphing the face to represent the horrifying lack of an interior rather than a profound personhood, the film inhibits the spectator's ability to decode the Woman. Indeed, *Antichrist*'s final scene suggests that, in her death, the Woman has paradoxically eluded both her husband's and the spectator's power. The group of women travelling through the forest at Eden imply that

the Man is ultimately ignorant about femininity, with the women's facelessness symbolically underscoring his failure to truly understand his wife. As I indicated above, the suggestion that the Woman confounds the Man's power and the spectator's epistemophilic gaze only through her gruesome death is intensely problematic. Although the Woman evades the Man's aggressive objectification of her, this only occurs once she endures a painful demise. Such a scenario is a recurring theme in von Trier's oeuvre: *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *Idioterne* (1998) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) all see a female heroine paradoxically evade patriarchal power precisely through her victimisation and, in some cases, violent death. My argument is that, in *Antichrist*, a similar scenario plays out over the representation of the Woman's face. The film's representation of her countenance amounts to a refusal of the art spectator's gaze and an evasion of the requirement to procure the Woman for his or her epistemophilic pleasure.

Spectacles of violence

The way *Antichrist* positions the spectator to engage with the film in terms of desire for knowledge intensifies around the issue of violent spectacle. Popular and academic discourses often imply that film violence should have an identifiable meaning or utility; for instance, as a function of artistic expression or social comment (Prince 2004: 241, 242, 244). Violence can even be recuperated as a mark of distinction if it enables innovation (as in Gaspar Noé's oeuvre [Laine 2007: 114]), fidelity to individuals' real-life experience of violence (such as in Coralie Trinh Thi and Virginie Despentes's controversial film *Baise-moi* [2000]), or as a way of facilitating viewer transcendence (as Pascal Laugier insisted of his film *Martyrs* [2009] [Westwood 2009: 76]). Yet the meanings of violence in *Antichrist* are indeterminate (much like the meanings of the events in the rest of the film) and therefore are not easily subsumed into these kinds of rationales. In addition, von Trier did not give a clear explanation for his film's use of such provocative images of violence. At the press conference at Cannes after the premiere of *Antichrist*, von Trier famously refused to take responsibility for his film's violent content, saying the film was 'the hand of God' (Wheatley 2009: n.p.). However, the ambiguity concerning von Trier's motivation does not mean that the violence in the film has no meaning; indeed, critics have proposed numerous theories about the gruesome spectacle in *Antichrist*. For example, Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen argues that the spectacle of injury is reminiscent of the tortures described in the

Malleus Maleficarum (1486), Heinrich Kramer's medieval treatise on how to detect and punish witchcraft (2009: 3–4). Asbjørn Grønstad argues that the scenes of violence compel the spectator 'to look away' and are therefore profoundly anti-voyeuristic (2011: 194). For these two authors, violent spectacle serves to evoke the misogynistic historical fact of witch trials and destroy visual pleasure respectively.

Although these theories provide some explanation, the meaning of the violence in *Antichrist* in relation to women's identity or experience remains ambiguous. On one hand, the film's representation of violence recalls the real and continuing acts of misogyny perpetrated against women in the historical world. One particularly gruesome scene near the film's conclusion sees the Woman excise her own clitoris with a pair of shears in an act of despair and self-hatred. However, the violence in *Antichrist* can also be read generically as a spectacle of 'physical injury' and 'victimization', an aesthetic that Stephen Prince argues is an enduring strategy for eliciting disgust in horror cinema (2004: 244). As I have noted, it is never made clear whether the Woman's violence is a product of psychosis or inherent evil. The gratuity of these moments is therefore largely unhelpful in relation to revealing the female subject in a causal, psychological sense. While the castration scene is filmed in extreme and direct close-up and is therefore intensely affecting, *Antichrist* does not give any consistent indication of the act's significance, leaving the viewer to decide whether it is mere spectacle, an indication of the Woman's psychosis or a deserved self-punishment. Yet, once again, this ambivalence is precisely the point. *Antichrist* largely withholds the means to make sense of the Woman's violence as rooted in a psychological malaise or demonic monstrosity. The image of her self-mutilation may show, as Linda Badley suggests, that the Woman has 'internalized' misogynistic violence, or it may simply be misogynistic discourse articulated in visual form (2010: 149). Like the Woman herself, violence in *Antichrist* is an inscrutable symptom: a spectacle with ambivalent meaning.

Conclusion

Described by critics as both provocative and infuriating, *Antichrist* is a highly reflexive art-horror film. Centred on the problem of a violent hysteric's malaise, the film pits its horror tropes against expectations that the narrative will explain the Woman's brutal actions. This act has consequences for the text's depiction of violent femininity. *Antichrist* frustrates the aggressive impulse to unmask the woman that appears

in cultural narratives about women's violence. The film consistently emphasises the Man's inability to comprehend his wife's illness, a failure that the text expresses both narratively and on a visual level. This controversial act of generic frustration in *Antichrist* also exposes the regulating powers enacted upon the female subject by the spectator; the film refuses to fully explain the origins of the woman's murderous behaviour, offering incomplete or risible explanations designed to produce frustration in the onlooker. As such, the film critiques the spectator, positioning her or him to share the Man's knowledge-seeking drive. In doing so, *Antichrist* enacts a filmic refusal to subjugate the woman to the epistemophilic desires of its imagined highbrow audience.

Antichrist is therefore best described as a sympathetic retelling of the 'woman as enigma' narrative insofar as it characterises the Woman as a misunderstood figure rather than a threatening entity. Although she brutally injures the Man, the Woman is positioned at all times as a victim of her husband's corrosive attentions, and she pays for his therapeutic failures with her life. This strategy notably departs from earlier representations of hysterical women in horror and thriller texts such as *The Brood* or *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987). For instance, Nola Carveth (Samantha Eggar) of *The Brood* has experienced significant emotional traumas in her life that compel her to undergo experimental psychotherapy ('psychoplasmics', as it is called in the film, a treatment that involves manifesting internal emotions on the patient's body). *The Brood*, however, does not show much narrative sympathy towards Nola. Instead, the plot focuses on the threat she poses to her daughter, Candice; as it transpires, Nola's treatment causes her to birth a troop of childlike monsters that eventually attack the little girl. In a similar vein, *Fatal Attraction* positions audiences to fear rather than empathise with the female lead, Alex Forrest (Glenn Close). In the aftermath of an affair with the protagonist, Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas), Alex reveals that she is pregnant and eager to raise the child. Dan, who is disdainful of Alex, is horrified. This revelation midway through the film is played as a tense moment that portends Alex's aggressive stalking of Dan. It also implicates Alex's violence with her childlessness and jealousy of Dan's family, thus recalling Plato's hypothesis that hysteria is caused by the uterus's desire for children. Certainly, the Woman of *Antichrist* meets the same deadly fate as these other violent women. Instead of straightforwardly portraying femininity as frightening and mysterious, however, *Antichrist* condemns male misunderstanding of femininity.

While *Antichrist* is critical of masculine power, it is important to note that this does not necessarily entail it engaging in feminist film

practice. While some reviewers such as Gross, Wheatley and Margaret Pomeranz do not explicitly express dissatisfaction with von Trier's representation of the Woman, I could find no critics who are willing to describe *Antichrist* as a feminist text per se. Indeed, some reviewers who comment on the film's gender politics take the opposing view, arguing that *Antichrist* disseminates a misogynistic representation of the female protagonist under the guise of an artistic right to provocation (Foundas 2009; Hjort 2011). Hjort calls von Trier a 'bullshitter par excellence' because his provocations are made with a deliberate disregard for their political context or implications (2011: n.p.). Drawing on Harry Frankfurt's definition of 'bullshit' as a form of cultural discourse, Hjort argues that von Trier's films are based on 'play and frivolity, rather than knowledge and understanding' (2011: n.p.). Hjort asserts that the director demonstrates a 'lack of connection to a concern with truth . . . an indifference to how things really are' (Frankfurt cited in Hjort 2011: n.p.). The implication of this statement is that *Antichrist* deals flippantly with the real-life issues of intimate partner violence and female genital mutilation that it depicts. Hjort's point is well taken. *Antichrist* contains no explicit condemnation of the spousal murder it represents. Indeed, the narrative conspires to justify the Woman's death as the only solution to the preceding events. When the Man asks his wife if she wants to kill him, she replies: 'not yet.' Her response indicates that, like the horror film villainesses that precede her, the Woman threatens the male protagonist's survival and is thus 'responsible' for her fate.

Antichrist does indeed contain problematic representations of women's victimisation. However, through its narrative of failed therapy, its manipulations of the gaze and its 'bad faith' towards its audience, *Antichrist* frustrates both the male protagonist's and the spectator's knowledge-seeking gaze. In doing so, *Antichrist* reserves its most strident criticism, not for femininity or female evil, but for the spectator and his or her expectation of the art-film text. Whether von Trier ever questions his own authority as the creator of the film is, of course, debatable. Nevertheless, through its machinations and obfuscations, *Antichrist* exposes a voyeurism that influences even the most distinguished art cinema spectator.

2
Science, Sensation and the Female Monster: *Trouble Every Day*

Animal-women, bestial aliens and wild human-hybrids are among the most enduring types of violent women in cinema. They appear in science-fiction films such as *Island of Lost Souls* (Erle C. Kenton, 1932), *Captive Wild Woman* (Edward Dmytryk, 1943) and its sequels *Jungle Woman* (Reginald Le Borg, 1944) and *The Jungle Captive* (Harold Young, 1945) and supernatural horror films such as *The Reptile* (John Gilling, 1966), *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942) and its remake *Cat People* (Paul Schrader, 1982), the erotic *Species* franchise (Roger Donaldson, 1995; Peter Medak, 1998; Brad Turner, 2004) and the cautionary tale about genetic experimentation, *Splice* (Vincenzo Natali, 2009). Claire Denis's melancholy story of desire and aggression, *Trouble Every Day* (2001), is a part of this cohort. Set in Paris, the film is about Shane (Vincent Gallo) and Coré (Béatrice Dalle), two people affected by a mysterious illness that compels them to viciously attack their sexual partners, resulting in several gruesome scenes that the film shows in intimate detail. Suffering from the advanced stages of the disease, Coré is a particularly bestial predator. Portrayed by actress Béatrice Dalle (who is nicknamed '*La Grande Bouche*' for her generous mouth and lips), Coré appears wild, regularly escaping from her house to seduce men and maul them with her teeth. As such, *Trouble Every Day* presents the violent woman as both an epidemiological conundrum and a monstrous scientific oddity.

Similarly to *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009), *Trouble Every Day* is a text that occupies the esteemed cultural sites of European art cinema and simultaneously references a popular horror tradition.[1] In its focus on Coré's threatening monstrosity, for instance, *Trouble Every Day* is thematically similar to sensational horror films like *Captive Wild Woman*, *Cat People* and *The Reptile*. It also contains the graphic depictions of

physical injury, pain and violent death that are typical of the horror genre. However, *Trouble Every Day* emerged from, and circulated within, a milieu of considerable artistic pedigree. The film screened out of competition at the 54th Cannes International Film Festival, a premier global event for art cinema exhibition, and toured to several festivals, including the Toronto, Thessaloniki and Rotterdam international film festivals. *Trouble Every Day* is also associated with the esteemed authorial persona of its director, French filmmaker Claire Denis. Prior to the release of *Trouble Every Day*, Denis's debut feature, *Chocolat* (1988), screened at the 41st Cannes festival where it was nominated for the *Palme d'Or*; her subsequent features *Nenette and Boni* (1996) and *Beau Travail* (1999) attained several awards and nominations on the international festival circuit.[2] According to Martine Beugnet, Denis is 'one of the most important directors of contemporary independent cinema' (2004: 2).

Given the film's dual art cinema and horror film context, *Trouble Every Day* attracted both praise and controversy upon its release. Like *Antichrist*, the film became associated with the 'new extremism' of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Horeck and Kendall 2011); however, unlike this film, the representation of the murderous female monster in *Trouble Every Day* was not an immediate focus of criticisms made against Denis's work. Instead, in addition to objections about the film's depiction of blood and viscera, much of the commentary remarked on the way that *Trouble Every Day* broke with expectations of a 'Claire Denis' art film. Prior to its premiere, critics had held Denis's work in an esteem premised on the view that she was an 'understated' filmmaker (Dinning 2009: n.p.). Laura McMahon remarks that Denis's work was respected particularly for its restraint; indeed, the preponderance of adjectives such as 'understated' and 'sensitive' in essays on Denis's work shows that many critics understand her authorial signature in precisely these terms.[3] Critics were therefore shocked by *Trouble Every Day*'s violent content. Viewers allegedly booed, hissed and fainted during the screening at Cannes. According to McMahon, some commentators found the film an unwelcome 'venture into the realm of horror and gore' (2007: 77), meaning that critics interpreted the film as both a departure from Denis's personal style and a transgression of the boundaries of the particular milieu of cinema she worked in. Some commentators, however, greatly appreciate the power of *Trouble Every Day* to unsettle its audience, recasting the visceral qualities of the film as evidence of its artfulness. Beugnet describes *Trouble Every Day* as a 'sensation-saturated' film (2007: 37); McMahon calls it 'a viewing encounter . . . modelled in

terms of contagion' (2007: 78); Tim Palmer describes it as a cinema of 'agitation, sensation and provocation' (2011: 71); and Andrew Asibong argues that the story and viewing experience effects 'viral' transmission (2009: 105). Indeed, the oft-noted feeling of being contaminated or caressed by *Trouble Every Day* suggests that the film participates in a well-established tradition of what Linda Williams calls 'body genres': films that provoke a physical response in the spectator (1991: 3). Critics who appreciate *Trouble Every Day* praise the film precisely for this sensuality and capacity to move the spectator.[4]

In spite of these numerous positive appraisals, however, the impact of *Trouble Every Day*'s sensual dimensions can be further analysed, particularly with respect to their formative impact on Coré's depiction as a violent scientific oddity. As McMahon, Asibong and Beugnet propose, *Trouble Every Day* does not sustain a strong sense of distance between the spectator and the objects onscreen. Instead, the film's stylistic qualities engage the onlooker's physicality, reaching out to her or him in terms of sensation (indeed, this sensuality is the means by which these critics recuperate *Trouble Every Day* as an aesthetically ambitious art film). This is significant insofar as thematically similar films about animal-women tend to emphasise distance between the viewer and the monster. Their stories centre on scientific voyeurism: in *Splice* (Vincenzo Natali, 2009), for example, the animal-woman is an experiment in genetic engineering; in *Species*, she is an alien-human hybrid raised in a lab; in *Cat People*, she is treated as a neurotic and hypochondriac; in *Captive Wild Woman*, she is once again a scientific experiment, this time in the human endocrine system. This chapter explores how the sensual dimensions of *Trouble Every Day* challenge this voyeuristic distance, eroding the boundaries between the monstrous woman and the onlooker via the film-viewing experience.

The monster as 'curiosity'

Trouble Every Day is a film about science and knowledge: the protagonist, Shane, is on a transcontinental quest to find a cure for a mysterious illness that threatens his new marriage. As an early scene shows in considerable detail, Shane is plagued by violent sexual fantasies of his wife, June (Tricia Vessey), in which he imagines her naked and bloodied. Convinced that a cure (or at least an explanation) can be found among the Parisian scientific community, Shane uses his spare time in the French capital to search for his former colleague, Dr Léo Semeneau (Alex Descas). Some years prior, Léo had conducted unorthodox experiments

on Guyanese flora with the aim of unlocking treatments for 'nervous diseases, pain, mental diseases, and problems of libido'. Shane is convinced that Semeneau's now-ridiculed research holds the answer to his predicament. In addition to this main story arc, *Trouble Every Day* also investigates why Coré, Léo's wife and a former associate of Shane, seduces and kills men on the roads outside Paris. The first time Coré appears onscreen she is engaging in this precise activity, standing in the rest area of an outer suburban highway during the early evening. A lorry driver soon pulls onto the roadside and approaches Coré, and she smiles invitingly (Figure 2.1). This moment establishes Coré as the film's *femme fatale* and its most pressing mystery; however, as is so often the case with the *femme fatale*, Coré is not what she seems. When night falls, Coré's husband Léo arrives on the scene: he finds the driver dead and Coré smeared with blood and visibly distressed.

The cause of Coré's behaviour remains unexplained in the film for some time; however, from this opening, *Trouble Every Day* establishes particular subject positions according to its hermeneutic narrative structure. Shane, and to a lesser extent Léo, take up the role of scientific investigators who roam Paris in search of a cure for the mysterious disease. Coré adopts the feminine position of investigated object who is quarantined within her bedroom. Although Shane is a secondary carrier of the disease and therefore also an object of enquiry, he coordinates his own search for a cure. In contrast, Coré is almost completely debilitated; she is the originator of the illness – the 'patient zero' – and represents

Figure 2.1 Coré as *femme fatale; Trouble Every Day* (2001)

its violent, uncontrollable end-stage. She is therefore a feminine object of a masculine scientific drive for knowledge. In this respect, Coré has a similar narrative function to the distressed Woman of *Antichrist*. However, whereas the Woman regularly describes and reflects upon her own experiences during therapy (and therefore has agency in her own treatment) Coré's affliction renders her virtually mute and helpless. As Mary Ann Doane argues of the classic *femme fatale*, Coré is an object to be 'aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered' by the investigators in the story, and, by extension, the spectator (1991: 1).

Through this narrative arrangement, *Trouble Every Day* participates in a well-established science-fiction horror plot structure that concerns the research and neutralisation of a female 'curiosity'. This figure is a female monster, either artificially created or naturally occurring, whose anomalousness positions her as both a terrifying antagonist and an epistemologically arousing object of enquiry. Films such as *Cat People* and *Captive Wild Woman* – as well as more recent science-fiction films like *Splice* and the *Species* franchise – all share a story in which a female monster is placed in the care of a doctor or scientist (who is usually, but not always, male). The scientist typically has two responsibilities that are in direct conflict with one another. Firstly, his own desire for knowledge compels him to study the female curiosity. Usually, the woman possesses physical attributes that make her a tantalising object of enquiry. For example, the beautiful Serbian protagonist of *Cat People*, Irena Dubrovna (Simone Simon), has the ability to change into a panther when sexually aroused; the genetically modified creature, Dren (Delphine Chanéac), of *Splice* possesses animalistic strength and athleticism; Sil (Natasha Henstridge), the alien-human hybrid of *Species*, is a hyper intelligent being who can regenerate after injury. Secondly, the scientist must also *contain* the woman, a task that is usually incompatible with his desire to unlock her secrets. This is because female curiosities tend to be unruly and dangerous: in spite of their minders' best efforts, Irena, Dren and Sil threaten their enemies' safety by escaping their confines and wielding their deadly powers.[5] As such, it is not merely the female curiosity's behaviour that operates as the central threat within the narrative. Her very subjectivity is antagonistic; in her unknowability, she challenges the scientist's persona as a possessor of knowledge.

Trouble Every Day, however, does not resolve in favour of masculine science or reason. By the film's conclusion, Shane becomes the monstrosity that he investigates: a predatory *homme fatale* who succumbs utterly to his sensuous and violent urges. When he finally locates Coré, she ignores Shane's pleas for help and embraces him, at first affectionately,

then violently. Reacting in fear and disgust, Shane struggles and strangles Coré until she dies, leaving her body to burn inside the house along with Léo's research. Shane then returns to his hotel deeply troubled. He abandons his wife to wander around Paris until daybreak, engaging in tortured, pleasure-seeking behaviour. On a whim, he purchases a small dog that he sees in the window of a pet store and takes solace in pressing his face against its fur; while travelling on a crowded Métro train, he approaches a strange woman and presses his face and body against her back (she does not repel his incursion into her personal space). Finally, when he arrives back at his hotel, he seduces and murders an attractive maid in the basement – after this event, he is able to return to his wife. When June asks her husband how he is feeling, his relaxed expression reveals that Shane has embraced his sensuous, monstrous nature.

In some respects, this ending resembles the conclusion of other popular horror films about monstrous female specimens. Coré's body, and therefore all evidence of her existence, is destroyed in a fire that consumes her house. Female monsters in other films meet a similar fate: Irena of *Cat People* is mauled to death by a panther whom she releases from his cage at the zoo; Paula in *Captive Wild Woman* is shot and killed; Sil in *Species* is decapitated and her body burned in a pit of crude oil. On one hand, the female monster's death and the destruction of her body can be interpreted as an ideological manoeuvre. By removing the threat that she poses to masculine scientific knowledge, the film reinstates patriarchal authority. This ideological strategy is also complemented by the fact that the female curiosity's traditional foil, the innocent heroine, survives the narrative events: after Irena's death in *Cat People*, her rival, Alice Moore (Jane Randolph), is able to achieve romantic union with Irena's husband; in *Captive Wild Woman*, Paula sacrifices herself to save her keeper, Fred Mason (Milburn Stone), so he can marry his fiancée; in *Trouble Every Day*, June outlives Coré. On the other hand, Shane's transformation into the diseased monster amalgamates the positions of the investigator and the investigated. In doing so, *Trouble Every Day* challenges the power of the masculine scientific look to objectify, designate and differentiate itself from the female monster.

Vision and sensation

The depiction of violent feminine monstrosity in *Trouble Every Day* also occurs via the film's visual style. Much of the scholarship on Denis's text describes it as a film that scopically invokes a sense of touch, tactility and physical contact. According to Andrew O'Hehir, *Trouble Every Day*

is characterised by its 'creepy way . . . of bringing you closer and closer to someone's face or body until you feel profoundly uncomfortable' (2002: n.p.). McMahon also observes that the film seems to intrude on the personal space of the spectator, stating:

> *Trouble Every Day* effects a viewing encounter which can itself be modelled in terms of contagion. According to its etymology ('con': together; 'tangere': to touch), contagion might be thought of as inextricably bound up with touch. Denis's techniques of tactile filming in *Trouble Every Day* work to 'touch' and contaminate the viewer, spoiling the hygiene of distanced viewing. (2007: 78)

This tactile aesthetic of *Trouble Every Day* directly opposes the distanced, assessing mode of spectatorship associated with the voyeuristic gaze. Whereas vision is remote in its transcendence, touch '[dissolves] the boundaries between the beholder and the thing beheld' and allows 'the possibility of one becoming the other' (Marks 2004: 80). Put another way, whereas the subjectivities inscribed by voyeurism establish discrete categories of the self and the Other, in a haptic mode of spectatorship, subjectivity comes into place in terms of an equivalence, encounter or exchange with the represented objects onscreen.

By adopting a suggestively tactile aesthetic, *Trouble Every Day* contrasts with earlier representations of female 'freaks' and oddities by reversing the way that subjectivity and monstrousness are engendered by more distanced, voyeuristic modes of spectatorship. As I mention above, horror films about the female curiosity like *Cat People*, *Species* and *Splice* typically feature a male doctor who studies a violent animal-woman. Very frequently, the doctor's interest is sexual as well as scientific, representing an intersection of erotic and epistemophilic pleasure in looking. Irena's psychiatrist breaches doctor-patient protocol and kisses her during a hypnosis session; Sil's creator, Xavier Fitch, forms an emotional bond with his creation; Dren seduces her male creator.[6] Mise-en-scène and narrative invite an epistemophilic mode of looking in relation to the female monster as a curiosity, either by literally objectifying the woman in the diegesis or by positioning the onlooker in terms of his or her remoteness to the female specimen. These scientific horror films also enforce distance between the monster and the scientist (and spectator) through the use of props and sets. Sometimes the female monster will quite literally be kept in a cage or vessel within a laboratory, surrounded by the paraphernalia of remote scientific observation such as microscopes and computer monitors. Indeed, *Species* begins in

this precise way. In the early parts of the film, the twelve-year-old Sil (played as a girl by Michelle Williams), wakes up inside a brightly lit glass containment cell as her creator watches from a mezzanine above (as it turns out, Sil is about to be executed by lethal gas poisoning, a fate she escapes by shattering the glass walls of her enclosure). Such suggestive mise-en-scène communicates that the girl is both an antagonist and a mystery. The cell signals that she is a threat to human life, but it also makes her excessively observable, thus revealing that she is a source of undiscovered knowledge.

These horror films inscribe distance between the monster and the scientist and spectator by positioning the onlooker in terms of his or her remoteness to the female specimen. This imposition of distance between the animal-woman and the spectator is strongly conveyed through cinematography and mise-en-scène. When Paula jealously threatens her romantic rival in *Captive Wild Woman*, she is filmed in medium-shot, positioning her as an advancing presence and outsider who threatens, but does not come into, the space of her victim. A similar stylistic construction of distance occurs in *Cat People*. When Irena attacks her doctor, the camera initially moves in on her eyes in close-up to suggest both her supernatural transformation into a vicious panther and the fog of lust that precipitates this change. The film then cuts away again to show the man's fate in silhouette. In her study of the monstrous-feminine in cinema, Barbara Creed argues that cuts to a black screen like this one represent an abyss: 'the cannibalizing black hole from which all life comes and to which all life returns' (1993: 25). These brief moments where the films' aesthetic conveys the collapsing of distance between the female monster and her victim tend to be a catastrophic consequence of the scientists' failure to control the violent female; however, they tend to be fleeting moments, with the film quickly restoring a distanced, monocular perspective. For the most part, horror films like *Cat People* and *Captive Wild Woman* overwhelmingly position the gaze in terms of its empowered remoteness, discreteness and differentiation.

Trouble Every Day disallows this remoteness. The film trades in vivid, tactile impressions, constructing a viewing experience that conveys a sense of touch. This both breaks with expectations of Denis's authorial signature of 'restrained' cinema and symbolically closes the distance between the onlooker and the onscreen monster, positioning Coré in terms of a structural closeness or equivalence with the spectator. This effect is particularly pronounced in a scene in which Coré seduces and kills a teenager who has broken into her house. Intrigued by the

mysterious presence locked inside his neighbours' home, the teenager convinces a friend to help him break through the heavy fortifications that surround Coré's residence once Léo leaves for the day. He finds Coré locked in the upstairs bedroom and, his curiosity giving way to sexual desire, breaks through the barriers across the door and into her room while his partner waits downstairs. Coré uses the opportunity to attack him and the lengthy sequence showing his gruesome demise contains lingering close-ups of his blood running down his face as he lies, helpless and screaming, beneath his attacker. A later image also shows Coré's fingers pulling at a flap of skin torn from her victim's body; the intensity of the close-up on this relatively minor injury sharpens the impression of pain. In one particularly affecting shot, the film shows his face in close-up as blood leaks from his nose and runs, in rivulets, back into his eye sockets (Figure 2.2).

The horror of this scene consists of its strong aesthetic emphasis on touch, both in terms of what is literally depicted onscreen as well as the formal strategies that transmit a sense of texture. Haptic sensations in spectatorship can occur without literally showing the act of touching onscreen – for example, one does not need to see Coré's hands rubbing against her victim's skin in order to sympathetically understand the sensation of warmth, friction and so on. Yet this scene both depicts touching *and* represents touching in haptic ways; for example, the way Coré's fingers play with the young man's broken skin is a particularly affecting image that conveys an exquisite impression of his pain. The scene also formally engages the spectator's eye to operate as what Laura

Figure 2.2 Coré's victim screams during the attack; *Trouble Every Day* (2001)

Marks calls an 'organ of touch' (2004: 79). This is best exemplified by the very first shot of the sequence, which consists of a lengthy image of the young man's torso as he lies on the floor of Coré's house. The camera traverses his naked body in extreme close-up, showing his skin, body hair, moles and pimples. Here, the eye is aligned with the camera as it traverses the surface of his skin.

This formal quality – as well as the literal depictions of border-breaking activities such as sex and cannibalism – can be further understood as participating in a closely related aesthetic of abjection, which has been identified by Barbara Creed as a key trait of horror cinema. Defined literally as that which is 'cast off', abjection involves an experience of the pre-Symbolic: the things that have been culturally and psychically rejected in order to accede to subjectivity. According to Creed, the 'images of abjection' that are frequently found in horror cinema include blood and viscera, corpses, saliva, sweat and tears (1993: 10); substances that exemplify the abject or 'not me' (Kristeva 1982: 2). Like many other horror films, *Trouble Every Day* does not only employ an aesthetic of abjection, but is also what Creed calls 'a "work of abjection" or "abjection at work"' (1993: 10). Representations of the abject onscreen can inspire a sense of defilement in the spectator; to illustrate this, Creed cites the colloquial expressions for a particularly frightening horror film such as 'it "made me sick" or "scared the shit out of me"' (1993: 10). *Trouble Every Day* similarly uses filmmaking techniques that convey tactile impressions of blood and viscera in ways that repulse. The second time that Coré escapes her house to prey on men, for instance, the film cuts to a close-up of blood running viscously down stalks of wild grass growing by the roadside. Likewise, after Coré has murdered the teenager, she smears his blood across the walls of her house in a garish pattern. These images are noticeable for their textural quality, conveying the thick viscosity of blood as it spreads and congeals. *Trouble Every Day* therefore invokes the abject not only because it represents Coré's transgression of bodily borders in her cannibalism and sexual licentiousness – it shows lurid images of abjection in order to physically repulse the onlooker.

This tactile, abject visuality influences the film's inscription of violent female subjectivity at the same time as it breaks with generic expectations of it as a 'restrained' art film. Although the film contains many understated elements – such as the absence of dialogue and the emotionally attenuated performance of its protagonist – the film's sensuality means that it does not establish aesthetic distance between the spectator and the objects onscreen. Coré is instead positioned in terms

of her equivalence; to use Marks's terminology, the mode of film address establishes 'a more yielding and intersubjective relationship between beholding subject and beheld object' (2004: 82). The film's positioning of the spectator therefore is analogous with Shane's fate in the narrative. Although he represents the values of observation, science and discovery, Shane fails to maintain his position as a distanced observer of the phenomenon he seeks to understand. Instead, he succumbs utterly to his illness when he attacks the hotel maid in the same way that Coré murders her victims. Shane therefore transitions from doctor to patient: subject to monstrosity. Indeed, several scenes in the film contain a subtle indication of the futility of abstracted observation and distanced curiosity that Shane represents. In two of the film's several 'laboratory scenes', in which Shane visits local Parisian research facilities to locate a cure for his illness, the scene cuts to a medium close-up of a preserved human brain suspended in liquid. Although the narrative does not make clear what knowledge the scientists around Paris are attempting to garner, human brains appear to be central to their search; in one scene, the lead researcher at the lab meticulously slices through a preserved specimen, sectioning its hemispheres for study. Arguably all human urges are formed and felt within the brain, thus making it the principal seat of human subjectivity; however, these organs in *Trouble Every Day* are inert and mysterious objects: the brain itself is repeatedly shown as an undifferentiated grey mass. *Trouble Every Day* dismantles the remote, discrete and masterful gaze contained in this moment as well as, by implication, the subject positions it engenders. Instead, the film positions the spectator into an experience of ontological encounter with the transgressive woman. Rather than differentiation, this produces an equivalence between the subject and the Other that is facilitated through the processes of spectatorship initiated in the film.

Sound, space and monstrous encounters

Although haptic visual aesthetics are frequently a key point of interest in work on *Trouble Every Day*, the film's use of sound also reaches out to the spectator to effect a tactile mode of perception, once again inscribing the violent woman in terms of ontological equivalence to the spectator (Beugnet 2007: 33; McMahon 2007: 78). The film is characterised by long silences and sparse dialogue that brings what little diegetic and extra-diegetic sound there is into significant relief. From the hiss of traffic on the Paris streets, the echoes inside a hotel basement and the moody soundtrack provided by British band Tindersticks,

sound plays a key role in establishing the film's melancholic, erotic tone while simultaneously contributing extensively to its unsettling sense of horror. Stephen Holden singles out the encounter between Coré and the teenager as a particularly upsetting moment in terms of its sound design, arguing that the 'feral agonized cries' make the scene the most horrifying in the entire film (2002: n.p.). After a few moments of quiet at the beginning of the sequence, the music track begins with percussive instruments; primarily, a woodblock and egg shaker. The sound progressively intensifies as a string and piano melody intervenes and eventually reaches its climax as the young man screams in agony. Both the diegetic and non-diegetic sound steadily increase in volume in ways that underscore the young man's escalating panic and fear and the scene moves through several sonic stages, beginning in silence and ending with an extreme intensity of sound.

Like the film's haptic visual style, this particular arrangement of sound in *Trouble Every Day* has consequences for the distinction between the depiction of the violent woman and the onlooking subject as produced in spectatorship. Martine Beugnet makes the point that the sound design in this scene disorients the spectator, echoing and resonating in a way that unsettles any sense of a 'definitive, superior point of view' (2007: 107). I would add that the arrangement of sound in *Trouble Every Day* also troubles the spectator's orientation by generating a sense of bodily invasion. This contrasts with the way that the classic horror discovery plot engenders monstrous female Otherness; instead of enabling a unified and separate voyeuristic gaze, tactile sound in *Trouble Every Day* enacts contact between the spectator and the violent woman. As Marks argues, sound can manifest as an internal or tactile sensation, such as a 'booming in the chest' (2000: xvi). The vocabulary that composers and filmmakers use to describe music in horror cinema also often suggests a synaesthetic connection between sound and sensations felt in, or on, the body. Take, for instance, Ross J. Fenimore's description of Bernard Herrmann's infamous string arrangement in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) as a 'sonic rupturing of flesh' (2010: 88), or John Carpenter and Dan Wyman's description of the high-pitched sounds in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) as 'stingers' (Hayward 2009: 2). These descriptions characterise sound as a form of aural assault that can position the spectator into sympathetic corporeal identification with victims onscreen, reaching out to 'sting' or 'rupture' the listener.

Rather than these more brutally invasive sensations, however, the kinaesthetic, percussive soundtrack of *Trouble Every Day* evokes the more gentle contagion of contact between bodies. Percussive music in

itself involves a touching together; as such, Tindersticks's use of percussive woodblocks and egg shakers aurally expresses the collision and surface contact of the instruments. Music in *Trouble Every Day* is therefore involved in the film's undermining of the demarcations between the spectator and the monster onscreen insofar as the sounds evoke a sense of contact. This haptic sound positions the listener in terms of his or her proximity to the monster herself, as well as a sympathetic experience of the onscreen events. As Tarja Laine observes, 'touch ruptures individual boundaries' (2006: 94). This encounter with the monster in *Trouble Every Day* reverses what Laine has called 'the traditional, dialectical poles of inside and outside, subject and object' that scholars such as Mulvey and Doane have identified as part of the classical cinema apparatus (2007: 10). Sound here suggests an encounter – a collapsing of clinical observation – that positions the listener not as a discrete, masterful subjectivity but in terms of his or her fluid proximity to Coré.

The aesthetic rendering of space has a similar effect, conveying motion, proximity and propulsion to immerse the spectator's body in the film, or, as Laine puts it, projecting 'the experience of outer space of the cinema in the inner space of the body' (2007: 118). This manoeuvre disrupts the 'illusion of imaginary [ego] unity and sense of control' established through the organisation of the gaze in the classic medically-themed horror film (Laine 2007: 33). Although cinema critics do not always describe space as something that is experienced in terms of touch sensation per se, the bodily sensation of motion *through* space, such as velocity or dizziness, tends to be the focus of much scholarly work on the issue (Laine 2007: 106, 116). However, horror films frequently use cinematographic techniques, such as zooms and tracking shots, to implicate the spectator's body in encounters with the monster onscreen. Some films figure the monster as literally repulsive – their victims flinch, look away or shield themselves upon encountering the terrifying creature – whereas other horror films convey the monster's attraction or pull. Vampire films in particular tend to express the monster's seduction as a near-literal magnetism. The classic film *Dracula's Daughter* (Lambert Hillyer, 1936) conveys the vampiric Countess's allure by zooming in on her eyes as she hypnotises her victims; the icy gaze of Mircalla Karstein *in La Novia Ensangrentada* (Vicente Aranda, 1972) serves as a focal point of erotic attraction; and Francis Ford Coppola's remake *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) illustrates the male and female vampires' irresistibility with camera tilts and dolly zooms, manipulating the spectator's sense of balance to convey dizziness, velocity and a physical experience of yielding to the monster.

Camera movements and actorly performance in *Trouble Every Day* enact a similar process to these vampire films, effecting a sense of magnetism and pull to illustrate Coré's allure. The encounter between Coré and the teenager in particular is choreographed in ways that insert the spectator into the action. The scene begins as the young man and his friend break a window into Léo and Coré's house and climb down into the basement. As they make their way out of Léo's basement laboratory, there are frequent cuts between shots as the two young men walk down the corridors and the camera switches angle several times, moving from overhead to eye level to ground level. Through this tracking, cutting and tilting, the camera seems to lead the teenagers through the house and, although Coré's allure is an invisible force that cannot be given physical form, the film conveys Coré's power, positioning the spectator's own sense of movement, balance and embodiment within her field of attraction.

This formal illustration of Coré's allure culminates in the erotic and terrifying scene in which she seduces, and then mauls, the young teenager – a key scene which I have already described in some detail. The immersive darkness of this scene drew the interest of some commentators, who observed that the moment unsettled their sense of visual mastery. As Andrew O'Hehir explains, the film brings the spectator closer to the actors' bodies in 'profoundly uncomfortable' ways (2002: n.p.), whereas Chris Fujiwara, referring particularly to the murder scene, explains that the moment 'is so dark [that] it's hard to make out clearly what she does to him' (2002: n.p.). Marks's work on haptic visuality provides some insight into the significance of the uncomfortable closeness of this scene to female monstrosity. Referring to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) as a way of describing the aesthetic construction of space in cinema, Marks describes such onscreen spaces as 'smooth' as opposed to 'striated' (2004: 80). According to Deleuze and Guattari, smooth space is immersive and undifferentiated, whereas striated space is 'in principle infinite, open, and unlimited in every direction; it has neither top nor bottom nor centre; it does not assign fixed and mobile elements but rather distributes a continuous variation' (1987: 475–6). Prior to Marks's analysis, similar theorisations of undifferentiated space also appear in Creed's work on the monstrous-feminine, where she notes the recurring appearance of the all-encompassing abyss in horror cinema, for example as black holes or voids, the monster's maw, or the cut to a black screen following a character's onscreen death. This abyss, she writes, represents the archaic mother figure that is explicitly associated with the maternal

body (1993: 25). Creed and Marks both argue that the representation of undifferentiated space onscreen articulates the dissolution of the ego in spatial terms: 'boundaries, designed to keep the abject at bay, threaten to disintegrate, collapse', explains Creed (1993: 29), whereas Marks suggests that smooth space 'does something to dissolve the boundaries between the beholder and the thing beheld' (2004: 80). For Marks, smooth space is also evocative of haptic sensation; because smooth space is immersive, it is 'felt' on the spectator's body.

In its suffocating darkness and closeness, the scene between Coré and her young victim closely resembles these descriptions of immersive space. Although their bodies certainly possess discernible borders (and skin itself is a border), the extreme close-ups aesthetically erode the discreteness of the bodies of Coré and the teenager. The image is so closely focused and dark that the pair at times become indistinguishable; indeed, the young man's blood is so deeply coloured that it further darkens the scene as it spreads across their faces and torsos. The scene therefore both literally depicts and aesthetically exemplifies a breaking down of the physical demarcations between the self and the Other. Put another way, it both shows the melding of corporeal bodies involved in sex and cannibalism and provides a visual allegory for this dissolution of bodily integrity. When viewed in the theatre, the darkness of the moment spreads from the diegetic space to the non-diegetic space of the auditorium, enveloping the spectator's own body.

Like the other aesthetics of *Trouble Every Day*, this representation of space engenders subjectivity in ways that figure the spectator in terms of proximity to violent femininity and undermine the violent woman's objectification in the cinema apparatus. The film's depiction of smooth space positions the spectator into a contaminating closeness with Coré as the violent female monster. As Marks explains, this embodied immersion in space dismantles the rigid construction of distance between the self and other that is called into place by the scopic regimes of classical narrative cinema, producing a sensation of being closer to the object, even 'the possibility of one becoming the other' (2004: 80). Additionally, Beugnet makes the point that *Trouble Every Day* is concerned precisely with exploring ontological indeterminacy, for instance, the 'paradoxical coexistence of the human with the animal, of the subject with the abject' (2007: 105). The tactile and immersive representation of space facilitates this process. *Trouble Every Day* enacts an encounter with the violent female Other, insisting that she is not an entity to be quarantined and controlled by patriarchal power, but an otherness that can trouble the very metaphysical foundations upon which masculine

subjectivity is conceptualised as a discrete and sovereign wholeness. Whereas a more distanced mode of viewership may position 'objects as distinct, distant, and identifiable' and maintain 'a clear, crisp relationship between figure and ground' (Marks 2004: 79), such immersive space positions the spectator and female monster in terms of their equivalence. Indeed, this mode of spectatorship enmeshes with the narrative in *Trouble Every Day*, wherein Shane, the scientist, transforms into the very monster that he investigates.

Conclusion

Trouble Every Day is now well understood as part of a trend towards sensation and brutality in art cinema. Upon its release in 2001, however, the film's intense sensuality and horror imagery confounded some commentators. As Beugnet recalls, critics condemned *Trouble Every Day* because they felt its plot, characterisation and message were not 'meaningful' enough to justify the use of sensationalist gore. She explains:

> Art cinema traditionally draws its legitimacy from a recognised ability to balance stylisation with representation mediated by a critical vision . . . The suspicion is that, with a film like *Trouble Every Day*, the rich intertextual dimension, the heightened effects produced by the film's distinctive aesthetic vision and the recourse to strong sensory affects are but ways of masking the failure to construct a meaningful commentary about one's world. (2007: 38–9)

The suggestion that *Trouble Every Day* does not construct 'meaningful commentary' about the world can be refuted in numerous ways. Judith Mayne, for example, makes the point that the film's themes of sexual desire, disease and former colonial lands establish a strong correlation between Coré's unnamed disease and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (2005: 108). Contemporary scientific orthodoxy traces the origins of HIV to West Africa; Coré and Shane's disease originates from the jungles of Guyana, a place that is similarly constructed as 'elsewhere' and 'Other' to Europe. By setting up such an analogy, *Trouble Every Day* comments on how the spread of this disease is linked to multinational greed and exploitation. Shane, a Caucasian American, is both a research scientist and bio-prospector. In his hurry to profit from Léo's research, he unwittingly contracts the unknown disease and carries it to both the United States and Europe. Another reading is that *Trouble Every Day* expresses anxiety about multinational corporations'

commodification of human sexuality. According to a website that Shane finds about Léo's research, the samples from his bio-prospecting missions are supposed to help develop pharmacological solutions to 'problems of libido', amongst other afflictions. The release of *Trouble Every Day* in 2001 occurred at a contemporaneous moment to the US Food and Drug Administration's approval of Sildenafil (known by its trade name Viagra) in 1998. Lastly, the film also remarks on the duality of sex as both a violent and tender act. As Denis herself says, the film is about 'how close the kiss is to the bite' (cited in Gibbons and Jeffries 2001: n.p.). Far from lacking meaning, *Trouble Every Day* addresses several issues through its sensual style and narrative.

In this chapter, I have focused on one particular 'comment' made by *Trouble Every Day* – or, more accurately, one 'consequence' of its style in relation to femininity, violence and personhood. *Trouble Every Day* represents the demarcations between masculinity and femininity, as well as monstrosity and humanity, as permeable. An investigation of the film's strong affective quality shows that *Trouble Every Day* produces the violent woman in ways that undermine the separations between the human subject and the monster. Such distinctions are central to the functioning of earlier horror cinema; although *Captive Wild Woman* and *Cat People* temporarily unseat the distanced, voyeuristic gaze through moments that enact a collapsing of spectator into beheld object (such as in the moment of death or the 'fade to black'), these moments tend to be exceptional within the films' governing scopic regimes, which persistently train a distanced gaze upon the female curiosity. In contrast, *Trouble Every Day* produces Coré through a sustained sensational mode of spectatorship. Thus, the violent woman becomes a figure who disrupts the positions of self and Other established in the story's scientific themes.

As a controversial and terrifying film about a violent, ill woman, *Trouble Every Day* bears notable similarity to *Antichrist*. Both are wary of the kind of scientific, hierarchical, masculine knowledge that erects divisions between subjects and simultaneously creates the female enigma. *Trouble Every Day*, however, tells its story using a very different stylistic regime to *Antichrist*. Whereas von Trier's film engenders the violent woman by manipulating spectators' expectations of the film's art cinema genericity, Denis's text interrogates the categories of human personhood by provoking an embodied, sensory horror reaction in the spectator. The two films also reach very different conclusions about the nature of subjectivity in relation to gender and violence. *Antichrist* is a story about the deficiency of the Man's knowledge of the Woman.

It dramatises one protagonist's insurmountable ignorance of the other; this being the case, in the world of *Antichrist*, the Man and the Woman remain very distinct beings in spite of their sexual and emotional intimacy. In *Trouble Every Day*, Shane and his wife are certainly alienated from one another – Shane is unable to have sex with June on their honeymoon and the pair spend much of their time in Paris apart. Coré and Shane's disease, however, means that they are as predatory and vulnerable as each other. They are consanguine, sharing the same pathogenic material. As such, the world of *Trouble Every Day* is one where violent men and aggressive women possess an ontological contiguity. To express this, the film creates a viewing experience that promotes closeness and, at least for the film's running time, breaks down barriers between the violent woman and the onlooker.

Trouble Every Day is therefore best described as filmic thought-experiment that queries the nature of selfhood, mobilising the violent woman to destabilise gender, humanity, violence and monstrosity. The film's strategy is thus not to discursively reclaim proper subjectivity for the violent woman (this is instead, as Chapters 5 and 6 explain, the strategy of *Monster* [Patty Jenkins, 2003] and *The Reader* [Stephen Daldry, 2008]), nor is it to manipulate film style as a means of articulating her unique experience (which more closely resembles the representation of violent women in *Baise-moi* [Coralie Trinh Thi and Virginie Despentes, 2000] and *Heavenly Creatures* [Peter Jackson, 1994]). Instead, *Trouble Every Day* answers the desire to know the violent woman by challenging fixed notions of subjectivity and otherness altogether.

3
Sex and Self-Expression: Fatal Women in *Baise-moi*

One of the most enduring images of female violence in the Western cultural tradition is that of the dangerous seductress. Archetypes such as Judith, Salome, Cleopatra and Clytemnestra, who all pose an explicitly eroticised threat of violence to their male counterparts, are some of the earliest recorded figures of female violence in art and literature. The link between women's sexuality and their capacity for murder has been perpetuated in contemporary film culture by more recent heroines and villainesses, such as the titular teen succubus in *Jennifer's Body* (Karyn Kusama, 2009) or the gynaecologically enhanced protagonist of Mitchell Lichtenstein's *Teeth* (2007). This continuing association between female eroticism and malicious intent has led Alice Myers and Sarah Wight to declare that all women's violence is framed in terms of gender difference and sexuality: '[W]hen a woman commits an act of criminal violence,' they write, 'her sex is the lens through which all of her actions are seen and understood' (1996: xi). Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry go further, arguing that 'a woman's violence is a *sexual* event' (2007: 46) (original emphasis). In a culture that has long conflated women's eroticism with their violence, it is therefore pertinent to consider how contemporary texts produce the sexual murderess.

A cursory survey of cinematic representation since the 1940s shows that films frame a woman's aggression as contiguous with her sexuality in a variety of different ways. Some films represent women's allure as both a means of obfuscating her nature and as a weapon to be wielded against men: the narratives of film noir, such as *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) and *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), or erotic thrillers, such as *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and *Wild Things* (John McNaughton, 1998), often contain a 'seduce and destroy' plot in which a woman uses her sexuality to bring about the downfall of the

male protagonist. Other films equate feminine sexuality with a more ontological danger; for example, the abject female monsters of *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976) horrify because they expose 'the fragility' of the symbolic order that governs masculine subjectivity (Creed 1986: 48). Other films position a violent woman's sexuality as evidence of her all-encompassing corruption: for instance, the eponymous character in Nazisploitation film *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmonds, 1975) has a sexual drive that corresponds to her cruelty and sadism, whereas sharpshooter Annie Laurie Starr from *Gun Crazy* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1950) is as libidinous as she is violent. As Sjoberg and Gentry put it, such narratives of women's violence see these murderesses as 'motivated by their overwhelming perversion' (2007: 46). Lastly, some films depict women's sexuality as a positive attribute; for instance, so-called 'action babe' films such as *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000) or *Kill Bill Vols 1 & 2* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003; 2004) feature a beautiful heroine whose good looks complement both her lethal skill and heroism (O'Day 2004: 203–4). In popular and exploitation cinema, the linking of female violence to sex is therefore common, albeit expressed in a multitude of different permutations.

Filmmakers have continued to represent violent women's sexuality in art cinema in ways that return to and sometimes refigure the association between female eroticism and violence. Examples of such films include those I have already examined, *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009) and *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis, 2001), as well as the film that forms the focus of this chapter's analysis: Coralie Trinh Thi and Virginie Despentes's 'punk-inflected porn odyssey', *Baise-moi* (2000) (Nesselson 2000: 22). *Baise-moi* differs from the noir, action and thriller films listed above chiefly because of the way it has been critically elevated through the discourses of film criticism. The film acquired its reputation as a worthy artistic product largely from the critics and filmmakers who sought to defend it from censorship (MacKenzie 2002: 315, 319). In addition, unlike earlier popular representations, which frequently insinuate the violent woman's eroticism or displace it onto costuming or mise-en-scène, *Baise-moi* is not coy about the violent woman's sexuality, constructing the violent woman as a sexual being through prominent and visually confrontational heterosexual sex scenes. Indeed, *Baise-moi* features the very kind of explicit sex – 'hard-ons and vulvas . . . fucking and fisting' – that James Quandt so emphatically decries in his article on contemporary French art cinema (2004: 128).

This chapter scrutinises the relationship between the use of heterosexual sex scenes in *Baise-moi* and the film's depiction of the violent

woman's subjectivity. As I shall examine, the discourses that produce Trinh Thi and Despentes's 'porn odyssey' as a serious 'art' text reframe the film's sexual content. Although art cinema has a reputation in some quarters as a kind of ersatz pornography for the puerile-minded, representations of sex in critically distinguished forms are expected to reveal or convey the human condition (much like the art cinema grouping as a whole). For example, Quandt explains his dislike of the gratuitous sex and violence in the 'New French Extremism' by arguing that it shows a kind of political emptiness and a failure to signify a greater concept besides the fact of sex itself (2004: 132). This commentary responds to an assumption that representations of sex in art cinema should be underpinned by an expressive or realist impulse. Indeed, Sharon Hayashi observes in her article on the Japanese 'pink film' that sexually gratuitous texts, when screened within the context of international film festivals or at Western art-house venues, can acquire a more profound meaning than they might have in a different context – for example, the pink film took on a reputation as 'a symbol of national [Japanese] culture' in European criticism in spite of the fact that such films were viewed as straightforwardly pornographic in Asian countries (2010: 48–9). The discourses of film comment and criticism construct sex in art cinema as a sign capable of revealing something about human desire, society or interpersonal relationships.

This being the case, a key concern in this chapter is how *Baise-moi* uses spectacles of heterosexual encounter to produce the violent woman's subjectivity. Within the film, hetero-erotic spectacle operates as a lexicon derived from the everyday lives of the protagonists; as Victoria Best and Martin Crowley explain it, hard-core aesthetics achieve a representation that speaks 'on a level with the world described' (2007: 169). This chapter's first section therefore examines how *Baise-moi* uses hard-core sex as a strategy to articulate the protagonists' subjectivity. In the second section, I attend to the issue of spectatorship in the film. Critics observe that *Baise-moi* has a distinct anti-voyeuristic feel that leaves the spectator feeling compromised rather than gratified by the sexual imagery on display.[1] As such, I examine how *Baise-moi* 'looks back' at spectators, inhibiting the scopophilic gaze that figures the fatal woman as an object of desire.[2]

Reframing sex in *Baise-moi*

Baise-moi is an adaptation of Virginie Despentes's 1993 novel about a part-time prostitute named Nadine (Karen Bach) and a slacker and

occasional porn performer called Manu (Raffaëla Anderson). Nadine and Manu are listless and bored young women with few prospects. The two meet by accident after each endures a traumatically violent experience. Fed up with her claustrophobic living arrangements, Nadine strangles her nagging flatmate to death in a fit of rage; she then discovers that her best friend has been murdered. Manu experiences an even more violent trauma: while drinking on a bench by the river, she and her friend Karla (Lisa Marshall) are kidnapped and brutally raped by a group of men. Manu is enraged; however, rather than exacting retribution upon her attackers, she instead kills her brother for failing to show concern for her well-being after the assault. Nadine and Manu befriend one another and decide to go on a road trip to the French *département* of Vosges to finish a drug deal; during their journey, the two women commit armed robbery, pick up men and murder several people for fun and money. Significantly, both Bach and Anderson were established pornographic actresses at the time of filming and had real intercourse for the film's numerous sex scenes (including the graphic sexual assault sequence). Nadine and Manu's trip, however, ends tragically: Manu is killed during an armed robbery and Nadine is arrested as she contemplates suicide.

The correlation between femininity, violence and sex in *Baise-moi* can be characterised in multiple ways. Some critics suggest that the film is a rape-revenge narrative, a story in which a gratuitously filmed rape scene motivates an equally explicit sequence of retribution.[3] Others identify *Baise-moi* with the same trend towards 'extreme' European filmmaking enacted by *Antichrist*, *Trouble Every Day* and the films of Catherine Breillat, Bruno Dumont, Gaspar Noé and others.[4] Focusing on the sexual content of such films, Linda Williams describes this trend in her 2001 article 'Cinema and the Sex Act', writing that:

> Sexually explicit sex acts are once again appearing in esthetically ambitious films depicting complex and explicit sexual relations that are neither the whole point of the film (as in pornography) nor tacked on gratuitously (as in soft-core 'exploitation'). (2001: 20)

The concurrence of Nadine and Manu's violence with their enthusiastic sexual activity could also be construed as a depiction of 'erotomania': the idea that women's exaggerated desire and aggression are paired symptoms of a psychological disorder.[5] Such representations in popular cinema include the violent protagonists of exploitation film *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (Russ Meyer, 1965), 'Bond girl' and villainess Xenia

Onatopp in *GoldenEye* (Martin Campbell, 1995) and the vindictive nurse Abby Russell in *Nurse 3D* (Doug Aarniokoski, 2013).

Although Nadine and Manu do indeed become simultaneously more sexual and violent, the significance of sex to the film's construction of violent femininity does not entirely fit with these popular and exploitation-film constructions. *Baise-moi* makes no causal link between the two protagonists' erotic desire and their aggression, and the film does not closely follow the tenets of rape-revenge narratives, either; Nadine and Manu do not seek out the original rapists for retribution, and they kill other women almost as often as they murder men. Instead, sex has an expressive function in *Baise-moi* insofar as it shows Nadine and Manu's subjectivity as marginalised women. Put another way: whereas a woman's sexuality is often used as a point of occlusion – or, conversely, of visual objectification – *Baise-moi* is an exploration of Nadine and Manu's experiences as subjects of a particular milieu. As critic Margaret Pomeranz states, the film is about 'wounded women, abused by and used by men, by women, by the world' and is therefore an 'exploration of two women of the underclass'. Hetero-erotic spectacle in *Baise-moi* therefore operates as an expressive strategy that represents Nadine and Manu's experience – their boredom, their social and cultural milieu, and their identities as violent women.

This expressive role of sex in *Baise-moi* is, in the first instance, made possible by the film's generic categorisation. Upon the film's release in France, critics and filmmakers were largely divided over its genre. Some journalists and industry figures characterised *Baise-moi* as a pornographic film; for instance, *Variety* reviewer Lisa Nesselson describes it as 'a half-baked, punk-inflected porn odyssey masquerading as a movie worth seeing and talking about' (2000: 22), and French publication *Le Monde* called it a 'sick film' (Sharkey 2002: n.p.). Although *Baise-moi* was initially cleared for exhibition in France with a 16 certificate, in June 2000 the State Council decided to review its decision following pressure from the conservative organisation Promouvoir. In order to prevent under-18s from seeing the film, the Council reclassified *Baise-moi* as 'X', a rating usually associated with pornography. Both during and after the censorship scandal, however, many intellectuals defended the film by insisting that, while *Baise-moi* does contain real sex, it is definitely not a 'pornographic' film. Filmmaker Catherine Breillat denounced the State Council's decision and petitioned in support of *Baise-moi*. Several other high-profile filmmakers, including Jean-Luc Godard and Claire Denis, also publicly demonstrated to have the film's classification changed (MacKenzie 2002: 319). This action succeeded; the State Council opted

to reinstate the defunct 18 certificate, a rating that had been abolished in 1990, to allow *Baise-moi* to be circulated. Although the film is still restricted in Australia and the United Kingdom, filmmakers' and critics' characterisation of *Baise-moi* as a serious work has since prevailed, especially in academia. Nicole Brenez calls the film 'a work of formal intelligence and figurative pertinence' that 'embodies the most advanced style of our time' (2003: 1), and researchers have included *Baise-moi* in publications devoted to the analysis of art cinema.[6]

By speaking out in defence of *Baise-moi*, critics, filmmakers and industry figures recast the onscreen sex scenes both as evidence of the film's status as a worthy artistic product and as a means of constructing the self in the text. Their activities established particular conditions of interpretation for the film and its erotic content. In addition to lending their authority to *Baise-moi*, many of the film's supporters argued for the film's value by invoking the precise economy of status and value that I highlight in the Introduction to this book. Specifically, these critics described *Baise-moi* as an insightful representation of human experience. *Time* magazine called the film 'stark, serious and original' and listed it in its 'Best & Worst' of 2000 feature (2000: 80). Film critic Margaret Pomeranz calls it 'an uncompromising exploration of two women of the underclass' (2002: n.p.). Likewise, a report from the Classification Review Board in Australia acknowledges that the film's commitment to a realistic portrayal of its subject matter gives it considerable artistic merit (although only up to a point – the Board ultimately refused to grant *Baise-moi* official classification, thus prohibiting the film's distribution in that country) (2002: 7–8). The manner in which authorities discussed *Baise-moi* during its time as a *cause célèbre* therefore not only allowed cultural authorities to deny that the film's sex scenes were pornographic; it also recast the film as serious commentary on social and interpersonal matters.

This positioning of *Baise-moi* as a serious dramatic text imbues the film's sex scenes with a special power to articulate Nadine and Manu's experience. Constructing *Baise-moi* as a serious art film about women's identity undermines the prurient mode of spectatorship expected of pornography. Sexual titillation is frequently understood as a decidedly inappropriate response to representations of sex in art cinema; cultural authorities tend to assume that 'art cinema's function is solely aesthetic' and 'antithetical to arousal' (Williams 2008: 295). Hypothetically, this has a prohibitive effect on an audience who might otherwise 'use' hardcore art films like *Baise-moi* as pornographic material. The critics who championed *Baise-moi* therefore reframed the meaning of the film's

hetero-erotic spectacle by linking it with a filmic milieu that possesses particular creative goals: specifically, the representation of human experience.

Visual culture and identity

Although the film's supporters had an important role in positioning *Baise-moi* as a serious dramatic text, the film itself also frames its sex scenes as expressions of the protagonists' identity. When Despentes's original novel was released in 1993, it emerged alongside the work of several other young, French-speaking female writers who used style to create (rather than simply represent) feminine subjectivity. These authors include French novelists Marie Darrieussecq and Lorette Nobécourt, as well as Belgian writer Amélie Nothomb. According to Shirley Ann Jordan, these authors 'address the issue of how the self is made (through) text' (2004: 27); for instance, Darrieussecq's 1996 novel *Truismes* draws upon the genres of fairy tale and pornography to convey the protagonist's exploitation, whereas Nobécourt's work uses first-person narration as a discourse that produces an effect of the self. Victoria Best and Martin Crowley make a similar point about Virginie Despentes's oeuvre, arguing that her work utilises 'the codes of popular culture' to represent the realities of the protagonists' social existence. For example, Despentes's writing uses street slang, metonymic references to contemporary music, a brusque turn of phrase mimicking the spoken word, and, in particular, the aesthetics and language 'of hard core pornography' (2007: 167). This serves two purposes: to create closeness between the medium and the world it describes and, subsequently, 'to confront the alienation and misogyny of this world' (2007: 165). True to this concept, the language in Despentes's original 1993 novel is imbued with the commodities and cultural artefacts of Nadine and Manu's world: 'Gas station, bright light socks you in the face, colors attack your pupils' (1999: 91) ('*Station-essence, lumière blanche plein la tête, les couleurs leur cognent dans la pupille*' [2002: 92]); 'Nadine puts on her Walkman, gets into the scenery. There's almost nobody on the train, and the air-conditioning doesn't work' (1999: 205) ('*Nadine met son walkman, s'intéresse au paysage. Il n'y pratiquement personne dans ce train et la climatisation ne fonctionne pas*' [2002: 209]); 'She leafs rapidly through the rest of the rag. Double penetration on a pool table. The girl is wearing very high black heels, an ankle chain' (1999: 92) ('*Elle feuillette rapidement le reste du bouquin. Double pénétration sur une table de billard. La fille porte des talons à aiguille noirs très hauts, une chaînette*

à la cheville' [2002: 93]).[7] This writing is not an empty affectation but a means of constructing a specific milieu from the written word. It indicates locale, economic position and gender relations.

By a similar logic, *Baise-moi* uses the tropes of visual culture as an expressive device that conveys the specificity of Nadine and Manu's classed and gendered identity. Pornography has an especially prominent role in this project of producing the violent woman; although other popular cultural products feature heavily in the film's aesthetic (for instance, *Baise-moi* contains several montages that are cut to the rhythm of a single musical track in a style reminiscent of music video), pornography's influence extends to almost every facet of Nadine and Manu's day-to-day existence. Both women live in rough inner-city suburbs filled with cheap hotels, dive bars and peep shows. Nadine is a prostitute and Manu has acted in hard-core films for money. Nadine also consumes pornography for her own enjoyment, which allows her to recognise Manu when the two women meet for the first time. In keeping with the pervasiveness of the sex industry in the protagonists' lives, *Baise-moi* shows Nadine and Manu's sexual encounters using an aesthetic that Linda Williams calls 'maximum visibility': the defining characteristic of mainstream pornography. Williams observes that the principle of maximum visibility can manifest in a variety of different stylistic regimes; however, its enduring goal is to make the sex act as visible as possible. Common aesthetics include 'close-ups of body parts', the lighting of 'easily obscured genitals', the use of 'sexual positions that show the most of bodies and organs' and, very importantly, the image of ejaculation (1989: 48–9).

Sex scenes in *Baise-moi* adhere to the hard-core principle of maximum visibility, showing images of real sex and close-ups of penetration during each of Nadine and Manu's sexual encounters. Rather than adding these scenes to sate an objectifying male gaze, *Baise-moi* uses maximum visibility to communicate the classed and gendered conditions of the protagonists' experience. Specifically, the aesthetic produces them as women whose lives are shaped by the sex industry and saturated with pornographic imagery; where sex is frank, utilitarian and brief. For example, Nadine and Manu are both paid to have intercourse in their respective jobs as a prostitute and pornographic actress. Even when the pair pursue sex for their own enjoyment, both women dispense with the niceties of courtship. One scene sees Manu depart so quickly after a sexual encounter that her partner is still out of breath as she walks out the door. As Despentes says, *Baise-moi* is about 'poor, non-white women' living within a rough French milieu (cited in Sharkey 2002: n.p.).

As Best and Crowley state, the film and the book attempt to 'write on a level with the world described' (2007: 169). In doing so, maximum visibility performs a function specific to the art cinema context in which it was placed, fulfilling its impulse to procure the subjectivity of its violent women. Even though Best and Crowley argue that it is not Despentes's intention to 'give the bourgeois reader [or viewer] an exciting glimpse into a seedy underworld', this is precisely what the film *does* do (2007: 169). Maximum visibility becomes a way of conveying Nadine and Manu's position as subjects of a particular marginalised economic, sexual and cultural milieu.

Hard-core aesthetics also lend realism to the hetero-erotic spectacle in *Baise-moi*, framing these scenes as unimpeded expressions of the violent woman's sexual enjoyment. Specifically, the sex scenes in *Baise-moi* rely on maximum visibility's powerful impression of indexicality in order to achieve a sense of unvarnished truthfulness in Nadine and Manu's story. Unlike representations of simulated sex in mainstream cinema, *Baise-moi* does not contain any ellipses (the 'fade to black' that indicates sex will occur) or tasteful framing of the actors' bodies in ways that obscure genital contact. As Tanya Krzywinska states of sex in art cinema, hetero-erotic spectacle in *Baise-moi* is 'framed by various realist modalities . . . to reveal the emotional, experiential and social realities of sex and sexuality' (2006: 43).The way that *Baise-moi* establishes this sense of authenticity contrasts with one of the classical *femme fatale*'s deadliest characteristics: her ability to falsify sexual interest. To list some examples, the viewer of *Double Indemnity* cannot necessarily be sure whether Phyllis Dietrichson ever felt any true sexual desire for Walter Neff or whether she simply feigned it for her own gain; although the titular heroine of *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) reveals her monogamous nature at the film's conclusion, her pretence at being a promiscuous woman completely convinces her lover, Johnny Farrell ('You were a great audience,' quips the local detective). Even when a character like Annie Laurie Starr in *Gun Crazy* is represented as sexually interested in her husband, one cannot be sure whether it is he or the acts of violence they commit together that excites her the most. In contrast to Nadine and Manu, these women's sexuality is constitutive of their mystery.

It is important to note that the strategy adopted by *Baise-moi* of conveying female subjectivity through the use of actual sex is at odds with some feminist accounts of the expressive possibilities of hard core. In her pioneering work *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*, Linda Williams argues that maximum visibility ultimately construes women's pleasure in masculine terms because, as an aesthetic, it is engendered

by a phallocentric logic that is best suited to conveying male pleasure (1989: 48). This is because common pornographic film tropes like the erect penis and the 'money shot' (the image of ejaculation in close-up) all operate as visible signifiers of male rather than female arousal. Sex scenes in pornography therefore attempt to 'force' women into similarly observable displays of sexual pleasure. This explains the prevalence of coercive sex in pornography where a woman is 'made' to experience pleasure through forced intercourse. The principle of maximum visibility also illuminates why hard-core films sometimes use mise-en-scène to symbolise women's climax, such as cross-cutting to images of fireworks and 'bursting bombs' as famously used in *Deep Throat* (Jerry Gerard, 1972) (1989: 111). Williams argues that the logic of maximum visibility cannot represent female pleasure, partly because women's orgasms are an internal physiological response that have no parallel with the male 'standard of evidence' (1989: 49–50). The logic of maximum visibility therefore coerces female sexuality into phallocentric schema of meaning. Indeed, Despentes and Trinh Thi's willingness to use such conventions in their film could suggest the extent to which Nadine and Manu (and also the directors) have internalised pornographic visual culture. The filmmakers therefore risk perpetuating precisely the kind of phallocentricism that Despentes claims she wants to critique (2009: 1–2). *Baise-moi* also does not contain any of the aesthetics that could constitute a feminist hard core, such as close-ups on the clitoris, female ejaculation or cunnilingus. However, although the film participates in an aesthetic that is still primarily the purview of pornography, *Baise-moi* frames these scenes as an expression of Nadine and Manu's sexual experience and enjoyment, comprising the very aesthetic that pervades the protagonists' world.

Maximum visibility and emotion

In addition to producing Nadine and Manu's social world onscreen, maximum visibility has another important function in *Baise-moi*: that of exposing the inner emotional experience of its two protagonists. Although the preponderance of casual sex and wanton murder in *Baise-moi* suggests that it is an extremely sensationalist and therefore superficial film, Margaret Pomeranz (2002), Gary Morris (2001) and Megan Ratner (2001) all characterise it as a story that reveals the protagonists' profound emotions, such as their anger, joyousness and disaffection. Writing about the maximally visible sex scenes in particular, Alix Sharkey opines that *Baise-moi* contains a fundamental sadness or *ennui*: '[D]espite close-ups of fellatio, ejaculation, sodomy and straightforward

heterosexual coupling,' he writes, 'the wobbling flesh is all too tragically human' (2002: n.p.). Describing a scene in which Nadine and Manu dance in their underwear together, Gary Morris observes that 'There's a joyousness and abandon here that hints at another, more pleasurable world . . . beyond the brutality' (2001: n.p.). Instead of arguing that the erotic sequences are base and emotionless, these critics suggest that such moments contribute to the personal expressivity of *Baise-moi*.

The film's emphasis on emotion is integral to its project of expressing the violent protagonists' experience. For both filmmakers and individuals, emotion has become an important means of articulating one's subjectivity in the contemporary social world. This is because emotions act as 'proof' of a subject's inner life and the uniqueness of his or her experience. As Caroline Bainbridge writes:

> the decline of the significance of religion [amongst other developments in modernity] . . . can be linked to the 'democratisation' of emotions for the subject. Seeking solace in interpersonal relationships, the subject turns to discourses of emotionality in order to pursue a sense of being in the world. (2007: 114)

Social theorists Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert make a similar point, arguing that in 'confessional therapeutic culture . . . a fundamental aspect for remaking the self has involved speaking about emotions' (2006: 125). Bainbridge suggests that cinema can therefore represent subjectivity by externalising the subject's internal life, with emotions acting as both evidence and an affirmation of personal experience (2007: 114).

The illustration of Nadine and Manu's anger and pleasure in *Baise-moi* therefore has an expressive function, materialising their subjectivity onscreen. This operates on both narrative and formal levels. In the beginning of the film, Nadine and Manu are clearly disaffected young women. Nadine is evidently bored with her job as a call girl. Listless and morose, she spends her spare time watching pornography, smoking marijuana and ignoring her nagging flatmate. Manu, in contrast, is an angry young woman who cloaks her fury in bitter cynicism. The most powerful demonstration of this occurs during an early scene of the film in which Manu and her friend Karla are violently raped. Whereas Karla cries with distress after the ordeal, Manu is furious and, simultaneously, unsurprised by the injustice of her experience. She declares:

> I don't give a shit about their scummy dicks. I've had others. Fuck them all, I say. If you park in the projects, empty your car, 'cause

> someone's gonna break in. I leave nothing precious in my cunt for those jerks. It's just a bit of cock.

Nadine's *ennui* and Manu's angry cynicism are underscored by the film's aesthetic, including the colourisation and mise-en-scène. This part of the film is aesthetically dull and ugly in a way that conveys the harsh oppressiveness of Nadine and Manu's experience. One critic declares that the film's exposition 'looks like hell' (Lumenick 2001: 40): it is set in wintery conditions and the streets appear grey and vandalised. The low-resolution digital cameras that Despentes and Trinh Thi use to film *Baise-moi* flatten and granulate the images, giving a visual equivalence to objects in the frame, suggesting an undifferentiated blur and haziness. The rough quality of the footage is also worsened by the use of natural lighting in some scenes. Not that there is much to illuminate – the locales of *Baise-moi* consist of highways, motels and gas stations. In these scenes, the entire texture of the film takes on a dull and brutal quality. As Martine Beugnet writes, 'it is as if the video's porous surface has absorbed the grime and bleakness of the world it describes' (2007: 51). Both story and form mirror the protagonists' grim and violent experience (Figure 3.1).

Sex and hetero-erotic spectacle operate within this broader project of expression, particularly when the protagonists finally act to end

Figure 3.1 Grainy footage conveys Manu's bleak world; *Baise-moi* (2000)

their victimisation. Soon after meeting, Manu announces that she and Nadine should set aside their troubles and have fun at all costs, 'follow [their] star' and 'let rip the motherfucker side of [their] soul'. The two begin to pursue pleasure wherever they can find it – they drink, smoke, dance, snort cocaine and, most importantly, commit murder and have sex. In this part of the film, the sex scenes are filmed using the same grainy and low-resolution video footage as used in the rest of the movie; however, the lighting in the bedrooms and hotels is colourised red, pink and yellow. These colours communicate a warmth and liveliness. Morris writes that Nadine and Manu 'seem most alive during sex' with the men they meet on their trip across the countryside (2001: n.p.). The transitions between light and colour in the film therefore not only underscore the movement between pleasure, anger and oppression that the protagonists experience; they transform the film into an affective experience that moves from ugly and violent to erotic and warm. In other words, the entire aesthetic regime of *Baise-moi* emotes. Within this broader aesthetic regime, maximum visibility's primary function is not to titillate but to imbue Nadine and Manu with an inner life evidenced through the film's illustration of their emotions.

Significantly, critics do not always interpret *Baise-moi* as a coherent articulation of feminine subjectivity. In a review for *Sight & Sound*, Linda Ruth Williams raises the possibility that *Baise-moi* is ultimately an unoriginal film. She suggests that *Baise-moi* is a hard-core intensification of pre-existing representations of female violence, 'in essence nothing more outrageous than a bloody buddy/road movie' and 'basically *Thelma & Louise Get Laid*' (2001: n.p.). Another possibility (although not one articulated by Williams) is that the film merely brings the rape-revenge genre to a predictable 'nadir' by showing the sex of rape unsimulated, amounting to a dubious innovation on an already-objectionable genre. Such criticisms warn against attributing too much intentionality to Despentes and Trinh Thi's film. Nevertheless, although the film's sexual assault scene and road-movie conceit do suggest that *Baise-moi* is indebted to earlier films – particularly *Thelma & Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), *Ms .45* (Abel Ferrara, 1981) and *A Gun for Jennifer* (Todd Morris, 1997) – the film's maximum visibility is not simply an inert addition to a pre-existing genre formula, nor has it been 'tacked on gratuitously' for the prurient pleasure of the spectator (Williams 2001: 20). *Baise-moi* frames hetero-erotic spectacle as a sign or communicative device marked by authenticity. Specifically, maximum visibility constructs Nadine and Manu as subjects of a particular, pornography-saturated milieu *and* expresses their emotional experiences as subjects within this context.

Returning the gaze

So far in this chapter, I have argued that hetero-erotic spectacle takes up a special role in *Baise-moi*, wherein it operates to signify the violent woman's subjectivity. However, I have not countered the argument, made by several researchers, that cinema objectifies the violent woman. Christine Holmlund argues that beautiful, violent heroines 'are not necessarily a cause for feminist jubilation' because their subversiveness is limited by their eroticised presentation. They are almost always 'white, lithe and lovely' and do not necessarily represent the far less glamorous personas of real women who kill (1994: 128). Similarly, in his discussion of the beautiful 'babe heroine' of action cinema, Marc O'Day gives serious consideration to Laura Mulvey's argument that classical cinema produces women in terms of their 'to-be-looked-at-ness', indicating that a structuring, scopophilic masculinity engenders their representation. O'Day posits that the action heroine's beauty 'allays' the transgression that her violence makes to normative gender categories (2004: 203–5). These arguments are pertinent to *Baise-moi*. This text absolutely represents its female protagonists as 'lovely' women: actresses Raffaëla Anderson and Karen Bach are both slender, attractive and spend much of the film's duration in a state of undress. The spectacle of their desirability raises a well-rehearsed issue concerning women's representation in cinema: although an art cinema viewing context might inhibit the spectator's prurient voyeurism, Nadine and Manu are nevertheless available for possible erotic contemplation.

I have argued that *Baise-moi* avoids objectifying its protagonists by framing erotic spectacle as authentic representations of Nadine and Manu's experience. There is, however, a second reason why this film obstructs the possibility of its protagonists' objectification; namely, *Baise-moi* initiates a mode of viewership that inhibits the spectator's voyeurism. At the time of the film's release, many critics argued that *Baise-moi* did not feel voyeuristic in the traditional, prurient sense. 'Despite its much-trumpeted sex scenes,' writes Alix Sharkey in the *Observer*, '*Baise-moi* contains little of interest for would-be voyeurs' (2002: n.p.); Lisa Nesselson of *Variety* agrees, writing that the sex scenes 'are not in the least arousing' (2000: 22). Morris takes a slightly different approach, observing that *Baise-moi* initiates a self-conscious, and thus self-negating, voyeurism. When watching *Baise-moi*, he writes, 'it's hard not to feel voyeuristic, even complicit in what transpires onscreen. But this is undoubtedly the directors' intent' (2001: n.p.). The self-consciousness expressed in each of these reviews indicates that

Baise-moi positions the spectator into a reflexive awareness of his or her act of looking. Consequently, the film disrupts any sense of voyeuristic surreptitiousness.

The concept of 'intersubjective spectatorship' can explain the significance of this compromised voyeurism to the inscription of subjectivity in *Baise-moi*. In her writing, Tarja Laine explores the notion that cinema can reflexively return the voyeuristic gaze. She suggests that this phenomenon is produced when films take up a mode of address that 'looks back' at spectators. Whereas 'traditional' spectatorship theory (or, more specifically, the psychoanalytic model that hypothesises the possibility of voyeuristic pleasure) presumes a unidirectional gaze between the spectator and the screen, the filmic strategy of 'looking back' brings the spectator into an awareness of his or her subjectivity in relation to the depictions onscreen. When a spectator experiences self-consciousness in this moment, they are no longer able to view a film voyeuristically; when cinema 'looks back at us', Laine writes, it can dissolve this 'classic opposition between the subject and object of the look' (2007: 10). Laine postulates that one way a film might return the gaze and therefore draw the spectator into this relationship is through a 'sudden encounter' with pornographic imagery (2007: 133). To explain this, Laine cites video artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila's video installation *If 6 Was 9* (1996), which abruptly edits unexpected pornographic images into more mundane domestic footage. Laine argues that the sudden switch between the 'observational' gaze solicited by the installation's documentary-like voice-over and the voyeuristic gaze associated with maximally visible imagery is so jarring that spectators feel self-conscious and ashamed. This shock effect forces spectators into a reflexive awareness of his or her act of looking (2007: 127–33).

According to this logic, maximally visible images do not enable a sexually objectifying mode of looking by default. In some circumstances, such images can actually disrupt voyeurism and neutralise the power disparity between the onlooker and the source of the spectacle. This is because the shock of awareness caused by the returned gaze consists of our identification with an imagined Other: the one who wields the returned gaze. This is why the economy of looks Laine describes is intersubjective: it demonstrates that 'subjectivity is clued up by one's engagement with the Other' (2007: 29). Maximum visibility and other forms of erotic spectacle can change how subject positions are inscribed in the cinematic apparatus. This mode of spectatorship has implications for how the woman is represented, chiefly because it inscribes her as another subject rather than an objectified Other to a masculine gaze.

Baise-moi uses maximum visibility to 'look back' at the spectator. Whereas most films introduce their 'fatal women' or 'babe heroines' in ways that quickly establish their 'to-be-looked-at-ness', maximally visible scenes in *Baise-moi* acknowledge the spectator in ways that disrupt voyeuristic visual pleasure. This occurs most strongly in the infamous rape sequence. Approximately twelve minutes into *Baise-moi*, Manu and her friend Karla are approached by a group of strange, aggressive-looking men. The scene cuts to an abandoned garage: the men step out of their car, throw Manu and Karla onto the concrete and violently rape them. As with all sex in *Baise-moi,* the assault is performed using pornographic actors and real images of penetrative intercourse. In one sense, this scene causes discomfort simply by representing rape – as Dominique Russell explains, 'The shock of rape [onscreen] returns the spectator to their bodies' because of a broader cultural 'anxiety about how a rape scene might "teach" rape' (2010: 8, 7). Additionally, however, the hard-core aesthetic places the spectator in the compromising position of watching a rape constructed with an aesthetic that is still the purview of pornography. As Williams argues, Western pornography has long constructed the act of 'witnessing' real sex as automatically titillating regardless of context (1989: 50). Indeed, the assumption that maximum visibility is always arousing was strongly reiterated by censorship bodies following *Baise-moi*'s premiere. Although the scene very clearly shows the horrific and violent nature of rape, the British Board of Film Classification required that the scene be cut, explaining in its ruling that 'portrayals which eroticise sexual assault may be cut at any classification level' (2001: n.p.).

Instead of titillating the onlooker, however, the combination of sexual violence and maximum visibility in the rape scene 'looks back' at spectators: when Manu is attacked, the hard-core aesthetic positions the viewer to self-consciously police his or her reaction to the image. As such, the aesthetic of real sex 'returns' the spectator to his or her body and enables feelings of implication in the sadism acted out onscreen (Russell 2010: 8). On one hand, the scene is too unflinching in its depiction of the rapists' violence to strongly encourage identification with them – aside from scowling at their victims in a menacing fashion, the men also loom over the camera, aligning the spectator with the victims' point of view. However, the rapists' aggression haunts the scene as a *potential* point of identification for the spectator. Viewers can imagine a sadistic response to the sequence (even if they, themselves, do not experience such a reaction) and may strongly wish *not* to identify with the attackers. The possibility of pleasure in the men's violence thus exists

as a hypothetical response to the rape scene. It operates as a fantasy, a negative way of relating to the film, in the mind of the spectator.[8]

In Laine's vocabulary, this self-consciousness is intersubjective and called 'triadic' identification (2007: 9). Triadic identification occurs when a spectator momentarily identifies with an imagined (and usually policing) societal gaze: a 'third' look that intervenes in the relationship between text and spectator. In particular, when a spectator suddenly becomes aware that he or she is watching material that the broader society might deem inappropriate, he or she may experience intense feelings of shame and self-awareness. As Laine explains, this occurs because spectators internalise societal norms that operate as an imagined look – 'the "panoptic" look of the larger social structures' (2007: 9). Hence, Trinh Thi and Despentes's choice to represent rape using pornographic aesthetics encourages this precise dilemma in the spectator. The scene's maximum visibility invokes the spectre of the inappropriate erotic response, 'looking back' at the spectator and forcing her or him to actively police their reaction to the image.

This repositioning of the invisible, empowered spectator to a textually acknowledged onlooker also occurs during a consensual sex scene when Nadine goes to meet a client. The john lays about eight hundred francs out on a small table, removes his clothes and has sex with Nadine. Although Nadine fulfils her job requirements by provocatively stripping off her clothes, she very clearly and unconvincingly fakes enjoyment – put another way, Nadine does not perform the 'involuntary confession of [female] pleasure' that Williams describes as characteristic of pornography (1989: 234). Consequently, although the scene is constructed with pornographic film tropes, Nadine's performance exposes the fakery involved in sex. This reflexive transgression of pornography tropes amounts to a parody of the act of *watching* sex. Whereas Nadine's nonchalant striptease at the start of the scene positions the spectator as a voyeur, her subsequent refusal to perform accordingly denies the spectator fulfilment of the erotic spectacle. Through this subversion, the scene acknowledges – even 'looks back at' – the spectator, compromising his or her position as unseen voyeur.

The concept of the returned gaze also illuminates events that occur in the diegesis of *Baise-moi*. Specifically, the rape scene can also be described as a moment that 'looks back' when Manu, quite literally, returns the gaze of her attacker. As she is being assaulted, Manu turns her head to look in the rapist's direction, asking 'What's that between your legs, asshole?' The man quickly loses his enthusiasm and retreats, thus ending Manu and Karla's ordeal early. In this moment, it is Manu

who returns the look of her attacker. As Laine explains, when the Other 'looks back' and returns the gaze, he or she takes up the subjectifying power previously held by the onlooker. In order to explain this, Laine recounts Jean-Paul Sartre's story of the peeping Tom in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre uses this story to argue that subjectivity is contingent on the existence (and the gaze) of Other subjects. He writes:

> Let us imagine that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole. I am alone . . . but all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean? . . . [my] person is presented to consciousness *in so far as [my] person is an object for the Other*. (1974: 259–60) (original emphasis)

Here Sartre describes the shame of being 'caught out' as a moment where he sees himself as the Other sees him: a peeping Tom or a pervert. In this moment of shame, the Other is empowered and bestows subjectivity upon the onlooker. It is also a moment in which the Other comes to possess subjectivity. This is because the voyeur can only feel shame once he or she conceptualises the Other as a subject and identifies with the Other's gaze. With the realisation that oneself exists as an object for the Other, the Other therefore becomes a subject, an individual, in the mind of the voyeur. A version of this scenario occurs when Manu returns the look of the man who violently objectifies her. While her insult is clearly an act of resistance against his authority, Manu's words also indicate that she knows her attacker's desires: by pretending that she does not understand – 'What's that between your legs?' – she shows that she understands his sadistic impulses all too well. Manu proves to her attacker that, for her, he exists as an object.

In contrast to representations of female violence in popular genres like noir and action, the story and the scopic regimes of *Baise-moi* do not present Manu and Nadine as mere objects of visually pleasing voyeurism. Even when the performances of Raffaëla Anderson and Karen Bach adhere to the conventional archetypes of the violent 'babe', something soon occurs to disrupt their placement as objects of visual pleasure. For example, the climax of the film sees the pair infiltrate a swingers club disguised as patrons, dressed in spiked collars and short latex dresses. Upon entering the club, Manu encounters a man who attempts to initiate sex with her. When Manu rejects his advances, he angrily insists, 'This is a fuck club here. It's not a mosque.' Nicole Fayard astutely points out that Nadine and Manu 'kill

those whose gaze judges and assigns status' and who 'turn them into objects and the Other' (2006: 72). Following this logic, Manu kills the club patron because he makes incorrect assumptions about her sexual performance and her availability to him – not to mention that he has also 'assigned status' with his racially charged comment. Instead, Nadine and Manu's representation encourages spectators to scrutinise their own response.

Although this intersubjective mode of spectatorship largely inhibits the possibility of an exploitative, objectifying gaze, it is important to state that *Baise-moi* does not totally foreclose all enjoyment of the images onscreen. Sex in Nadine and Manu's world is sometimes exploitative and violent, yet their erotic encounters with men are not always so serious. The protagonists also greatly enjoy sex. An audience member watching the film with uninterrupted shame or earnestness would therefore be out of sync with the film's mischievous energy and its self-reflexive humour. What occurs in *Baise-moi* is a continued disruption of the empowered spectator and a foregrounding of Nadine and Manu as the subjects of the film – the ones who enunciate and control the action.

Conclusion

When women kill in cinema, sex very often precedes, follows or precipitates their violence. As Sjoberg and Gentry observe, 'women's involvement in sexual activity is somehow always closely linked to women's violence' (2007: 46). This is certainly true of *Baise-moi*, a film that sees its protagonists go on an adventure of theft, sex and murder. Sexuality is also central to the violent woman's elusiveness: it enthrals, provokes investigation and deceives the onlooker. However, *Baise-moi* employs aesthetic strategies that disrupt the objectifying gaze that has long been associated with the violent woman. Popular genres that link female violence and sex emphasise the woman's hetero-erotic appeal in ways that betray an organising voyeuristic subjectivity inscribed in the text. In contrast, *Baise-moi* uses sex primarily to avoid such objectification. Drawing on the aesthetic of maximum visibility, the film positions the onlooker in a relationship of anti-voyeurism to the text; as Alexandra Heller-Nicholas explains, the film 'seeks to actively defy the normative "male gaze" of Hollywood narrative cinema' (2011: 165). The organisation of the gaze in *Baise-moi* instead establishes an intersubjective equivalence between the spectator and the protagonists

onscreen. *Baise-moi* also uses maximum visibility as a lexicon sourced from the everyday life of the protagonists that authentically expresses their experience.

One way of explaining the significance of this manoeuvre is to draw on Williams's observations regarding sex and knowledge made in the first paragraph of her key book *Hard Core*. Williams opens with an excerpt from Denis Diderot's tale *Les bijoux indiscrets* (1748) concerning a magic ring gifted to the sultan Mangogul – when turned in its setting, the ring has the power to make women 'speak' and 'recount their affairs in a loud, clear voice' (cited in Williams 1989: 1). Diderot's story is, of course, a thinly veiled allegory for a preoccupying male curiosity about that most elusive of phenomena: women's sexual pleasure. The tale fantasises about the ability to command women to explain their enigmatic feminine subjectivity once and for all. Williams thus uses this story to introduce her key argument in *Hard Core*: that the aesthetic of pornographic maximum visibility conspires to represent women's desire and convey her sexual pleasure. Diderot's tale, however, is also useful for explaining the way that *Baise-moi* approaches hetero-erotic spectacle. It is a film that wants to *avoid* the coercion – or the 'magic trick' – of forcing violent women to speak about their intimate sexual subjectivity. Instead, Nadine and Manu unmask *themselves* using the very pornographic idiom that they are familiar with (and, controversially, that objectifies them as women). This also explains why the protagonists of *Baise-moi* are amongst the least enigmatic in this book. The film's project is to dismantle the mystery of the violent woman's subjectivity, not to devote screen time establishing Nadine and Manu's epistemologically problematic status.

This expressive rationale differentiates *Baise-moi* from some of the other texts considered in this book, particularly those that concern the intersection of women's sexuality and violence. In *Antichrist*, for example, sex is a point of estrangement between the Man and Woman. The film dramatises the Man's fundamental misunderstanding of his wife, and the disconnection between the pair persists in spite of their marital intimacy. Indeed, the sex scenes between the Man and Woman, which are often bitter and violent, underscore the lack of communication between the two. At one point, the Woman demands that the Man slap her across the face while the two are intimate together; later, she attacks him at a vulnerable moment during intercourse. As Chapter 6 explains, Stephen Daldry's post-Holocaust film *The Reader* (2008) also asserts that sexual intimacy does not entail knowledge of the Other – for the male

protagonist, sex is the site where his sense of estrangement from his violent lover is most keenly experienced.[9]

Compared to these examples, *Baise-moi* is driven by a truth-telling impulse. As Despentes says:

> *Baise-Moi* is a film about violent 'lower class' women, made by supposedly marginal women. The mainstream doesn't want to hear about people with nothing, the disenfranchised, the marginals, taking up arms and killing people for fun and money. It happens, of course, but we're not allowed to acknowledge it. (cited in Sharkey 2002: n.p.)

As these comments suggest, *Baise-moi* is a film that uncompromisingly relates the violent woman's experience to the spectator, even if this process involves exposing audiences to aspects of Nadine and Manu's lives that they may not wish to confront. To know the violent woman in *Baise-moi* is to witness all parts of her experience: her hedonistic pleasures, her sexual victimisation and her brutality.

4

Romance and the Lesbian Couple: *Heavenly Creatures*

This book has so far examined three of the most widespread iterations of the violent woman as she appears in cinema: the psychologically disturbed hysteric, the monstrous woman as a scientific curiosity and the sexualised female killer. A fourth common figure of violent femininity is the murderous lesbian, a type that has many different manifestations in popular cinema. She appears as the esoteric vampire in films like *The Vampire Lovers* (Roy Ward Baker, 1970) and *The Hunger* (Tony Scott, 1983); a ruthless antagonist in films such as *Cleopatra Jones* (Jack Starrett, 1973) and *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, 1974); and a seductress with Sapphic tendencies in *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and *Side Effects* (Steven Soderbergh, 2013). Like the hysteric and the monstrous animal-woman, the cultural aetiology of the violent lesbian archetype can be traced to the way women's violence is connected to feminine sexual dysfunction. As Lynda Hart writes, 'Lesbians in mainstream representations have almost always been depicted as predatory, dangerous, and pathological' (1994: vii), whereas Andrea Weiss argues that 'the most persistent lesbian image in the history of the cinema' is that of the lesbian vampire, a figure who encapsulates the 'pathologizing' of women's same-sex relationships because of the vampire's association with infectious disease (1992: 84, 87).

Several films circulating within the art and festival film circuit deal with lesbian, bisexual and queer killers in ways that reject these stereotypes. *Sister My Sister* (Nancy Meckler, 1994), *Fun* (Rafal Zielinski, 1994), *Butterfly Kiss* (Michael Winterbottom, 1995) and *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003) all positively emphasise the lesbian's capacity for love in ways that break with earlier depictions of lesbianism as a perverse sexual drive. Key among these is director Peter Jackson and screenwriter Fran Walsh's drama *Heavenly Creatures* (1994). The film is based on the

true story of Juliet Hulme (played by Kate Winslet) and Pauline Parker (Melanie Lynskey), two teenage girls convicted of killing Pauline's mother, Honora Parker (Sarah Peirse), in New Zealand in 1954. The film is the fourth feature by Jackson and signalled a change in tone for the director, who previously directed comedy-horror films such as *Bad Taste* (1987), *Meet the Feebles* (1989) and *Braindead* (1992). Quite unlike these texts, *Heavenly Creatures* was a celebrated festival hit in continental Europe. The film won the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival and was acquired by Bob and Harvey Weinstein's distribution company, Miramax Films, which distributed it to art-house cinemas in the United States and United Kingdom.

Compared to other filmic depictions of violent women, both heterosexual and non-heterosexual, *Heavenly Creatures* is remarkable for its emotionally charged depiction of a love relationship. Although heterosexual violent women in film are often beautiful and sexually available, many do not end up in a romantic relationship. Crazy, self-destructive passion or *l'amour fou* is sometimes found in films about murderous heterosexual duos, such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), and some films featuring violent women conclude with a romantic union, like *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (Renny Harlin, 1996) and *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995). However, commonly films which feature female killers, such as *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1993), *Out of Sight* (Steven Soderbergh, 1998), *Thelma & Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1992) and *Set It Off* (F. Gary Gray, 1996), defy the Hollywood trend of uniting a pair of lovers at the conclusion. In contrast, romance dominates *Heavenly Creatures* in a way that differentiates it from these narratives about killer women. Whereas romantic partnerships are a secondary subplot to the main narrative action in heterosexual films about violent women – or a source of both horror and titillation in lesbian thrillers – in *Heavenly Creatures*, the love story *is* the main narrative action. At the same time, however, the film is also notable for its brutally affecting depiction of Pauline and Juliet's violent deed, an event that brings their romance to a definitive close. The film ends with a graphic and drawn-out scene in which the pair bludgeon Pauline's mother to death. In some respects, this moment's violent intensity matches the emotional force of their romance.

Focusing particularly on this dual dynamic of intense love and brutal violence, this chapter examines how *Heavenly Creatures* represents the violent lesbian subject. One particular point of interest throughout this chapter is how *Heavenly Creatures* conveys the girls' innermost experiences in order to reveal the violent lesbian's 'secret' subjectivity.

In keeping with the broader cultural tendency to represent the violent woman as enigmatic, films within the horror and thriller genres tend to position the lesbian as an elusive figure. Films like *The Vampire Lovers*, *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992) and *Side Effects* each contain villainesses whose motives – and, often, the full extent of their homosexual desires – are withheld from the spectator. This characterisation of female homosexuality as enigmatic aligns with Hart's observation that lesbian sexuality has, for much of its history in the West, been discursively produced as a secret. Firstly, lesbianism operates as the necessary opposite against which proper sexuality, gender and identity are defined (Hart 1994: ix). Lesbian practice has also historically been kept 'secret' from the populace. Hart recounts an occasion in 1921 where the British Director of Public Prosecutions, Lord Desart, insisted that to legislate against female homosexuality would be 'to bring it to the notice of women who had never heard of it' (cited in Hart 1994: 3). This anxious need to keep lesbianism a secret is well expressed in the vampire films *The Vampire Lovers*, *Daughters of Darkness* (Harry Kümel, 1971), *La Novia Ensangrentada* (Vicente Aranda, 1972) and *The Hunger*. In each of these films, a beautiful vampire introduces an ingénue to the pleasures of both lesbianism and vampirism. Finally, lesbianism has also been characterised as a secretive practice in and of itself. In his studies of human sexuality, Havelock Ellis argues that lesbianism is difficult to identify: firstly, because of women's propensity for intimate friendship; secondly, because of women's ignorance about their own sexual drives; and thirdly, because of female furtiveness even if they *are* aware of their desires (cited in Hart 1994: 6). Anxiety over such elusiveness is expressed in films containing queer or lesbian women, such as *The Vampire Lovers*, *Single White Female* and *Side Effects*; in each of these texts, the violent antagonist's desires initially are ambiguous or difficult to detect.

Heavenly Creatures takes up this 'secret' of the aggressive lesbian, structuring its narrative as an investigation of the protagonists' motives for violence. In the analysis that follows, I consider how the film conveys the girls' innermost experiences as a means of producing the violent lesbian's subjectivity. As I have noted, *Heavenly Creatures* exhibits a strong thematic focus on love; I therefore examine how the romance operates as a subjectifying discourse within *Heavenly Creatures* that makes a 'romantic subject' out of the enigmatic lesbian. The second section of this chapter considers another salient textual characteristic of this film: the shocking scene of violence that concludes the narrative. Aside from being an exhilarating story of love, *Heavenly Creatures* also builds considerable tension in the lead-up to the protagonists' act of violence.

The final scene's explosive intensity is somewhat incongruous with the film's earlier focus on romance; indeed, the brutality of the murder scene threatens to completely destroy any positive feelings towards the protagonists that the love story cultivates. I therefore investigate how the violence in fact enables the spectator's affective identification with the protagonists, particularly their aggression and victimisation. By adopting these narrative and formal strategies, *Heavenly Creatures* positions itself as a text that shows the secret lives of its central characters.

Throughout this chapter, I describe the protagonists of *Heavenly Creatures* as 'lesbian' rather than 'queer', where the former term indicates a relatively stable sexual preference while the latter denotes a more fluid sexuality that defies categorisation. Whether the girls are lesbians or not is a debatable point; as I discuss in the passages below, Juliet and Pauline do not identify as homosexual. Indeed, Pauline has heterosexual sex with a young man and both girls engage in romantic idolisation of male celebrities. As Nicole Richter observes, many analyses of the lesbian in cinema (specifically of the lesbian vampire) ignore issues of bisexuality when, in fact, many such characters can be described in this way (2013: 274). The narrative of *Heavenly Creatures* also never confirms whether Juliet and Pauline's love is sexual or simply the kind of obsessive friendship common to teenage girls. I do not use the term 'lesbian' in ignorance of these issues. Instead, my use of the word reflects the treatment of women's same-sex desire in *Heavenly Creatures* and, indeed, in a number of other popular and exploitation films, as an identity that can be uncovered. Just as the vampiric status of Carmilla Karnstein of *The Vampire Lovers* or Countess Bathory of *Daughters of Darkness* can be 'exposed', their true nature as lesbians can similarly be revealed. Secrecy, in this context, has an essentialising function, solidifying the category of the lesbian and positing it as an identifiable sexuality that can be known or concealed.

The cultural instrumentality of romance

Heavenly Creatures begins with a flash-forward to the immediate aftermath of Honora Parker's murder in 1954. Screaming hysterically and covered in blood, Pauline and Juliet run from the scene of their crime in a public park, calling for help. Rather than immediately pursuing this event, however, the film flashes back in time to approximately a year earlier when Pauline and Juliet meet at Christchurch Girls' High School. Juliet is a beautiful and precocious émigré from England who impresses Pauline on her first day of school when she boldly corrects

their teacher's French. The two girls quickly develop an intense emotional connection, a bond that *Heavenly Creatures* represents in extensive detail. Much of the film's first half consists of a series of strongly affective scenes in which the girls play together around the locales of Christchurch: they ride their bicycles, swim in the bay at Port Levy and act out scenes from their self-authored stories about the magical kingdom of 'Borovnia'. However, Juliet and Pauline's relationship is soon beset by difficulty. The girls' parents grow concerned about the intensity of their friendship. Following advice from Juliet's father, Dr Hulme (Clive Merrison), Honora takes Pauline to a doctor who diagnoses the young girl with 'female homosexuality', leading Honora to restrict her daughter's activities with Juliet. Eventually, following the breakdown of her parents' marriage, Juliet is told that she is to live with a relative in South Africa. Facing their impending separation, Pauline suggests that she and Juliet murder Honora and leave the country together. The pair carry out their plan, bludgeoning Honora to death with a piece of brick. As the end title cards reveal, the girls are arrested, convicted and ordered never to see one another again.

While *Heavenly Creatures* is, ostensibly, a true-crime thriller that recounts a graphic act of matricide, the film's retelling of Pauline and Juliet's friendship more closely follows the contours of a love story: the girls form an attachment, endure persecution as a consequence of their relationship and are tragically separated at the film's conclusion. *Heavenly Creatures* alludes specifically to what David Shumway calls 'medieval' or 'early European' romance (2003: 14–15). As Shumway explains, romance was originally a literary form associated with the medieval poetry of Western Europe and evolved, in large part, from the twelfth-century legend of Tristan and Isolde and the closely related Arthurian narrative (2003: 14). In its simplest form, this narrative involves a knight's pure yet adulterous love for the king's lady, with the story often adopting an intense melancholic tone because of the impossibility of their union. As evidenced by Pauline and Juliet's stories about the inhabitants of Borovnia – the chivalrous Charles and noble Deborah – the protagonists of *Heavenly Creatures* are well acquainted with this literary tradition. Romance texts, however, serve multiple cultural functions which are pertinent to understanding the narrative of *Heavenly Creatures*. As they manifest in a twentieth-century context, romance performs the particular cultural work of shaping understandings of love and human selfhood. As Paul Johnson explains, 'Love, as Foucault (1988) would have termed it, is a technology of the self' as well as a 'dynamic' and continuing process 'for producing practices and identities' in culture (2005: 79, 1).

The romance genre may at first seem a problematic means of representing the secret of lesbian subjectivity. Some feminist researchers have argued that romance is a conservative mode that repositions women into heteronormative social roles. Mary Ann Doane, for example, argues that the 'woman's film' of the 1940s ultimately punishes the romantic heroine for transgressing patriarchal notions of feminine passivity with her desire (1987: 99). Barbara Klinger and Kathrina Glitre contend (albeit with some caveats) that heterosexual romance reinserts women into traditional familial and sexual arrangements. In her survey of romantic 'chick flicks' – a 'contemporary manifestation of the woman's film' focused on a 'female protagonist who struggles with the difficulties of relationships' (2006: 145) – Klinger finds that many female-oriented romance films ultimately conceive of female subjectivity in normative ways (2006: 173). Both Klinger and Glitre argue that film romance regularly posits romantic union as an ideal outcome for the female protagonist. By placing the romantic union at the conclusion of a narrative, such films also suggest that coupling is a significant achievement for the female protagonist as well as a resolution to the conflict that has occurred in her life.

Although the popular romance film may have a conservative impulse, the view that it always serves the interests of heteronormative patriarchy is problematised when such stories contain lovers of the same sex. In such instances, romance can legitimise same-sex desire. Firstly, as an established and popular mode, romance can normalise homosexuality precisely because the emotions and scenarios that it presents are so culturally recognisable. As Matt Connolly argues, romance can facilitate audiences' acceptance of 'alien' or 'difficult' narrative scenarios, such as homosexual relationships, by anchoring them in a familiar and pleasurable narrative schema (2009: n.p.). Several other researchers also argue that romance's longevity and familiarity as a mode make it a 'safe' discourse in which to raise culturally challenging issues. Geraldine Heng, for example, argues that the literary romance of the medieval period was so formally adaptable that it could redress cultural traumas in its narrative. Romance, she writes, discusses challenging issues 'through a loop of the familiar and the enjoyable', therefore easing them into cultural awareness and acceptance (2003: 3). Barbara Koziak makes a similar remark in her analysis of *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), noting that Focus Features explicitly marketed the film as a traditional romance in order to characterise the film as an accessible product rather than an 'art' or 'GLBT' film. According to Koziak, romance is a 'powerful cultural authority' that lends its power to the stories that it tells. Romance narratives associate homosexual relationships with love, an emotion that

is seen as irreproachable in contemporary culture (2009: n.p.). Such narratives also operate by stressing commonalities between individuals, positing love as a shared or universal emotion that transcends difference. Prior to any textual strategies a film might employ, Koziak argues, romance's ability to 'invoke' romantic love's cultural status sanctions gay love (2009: n.p.).[1]

The romance narrative in *Heavenly Creatures* shares this cultural instrumentality because of its emphasis on the love story. The film devotes considerably more screen time to elucidating the romantic relationship between the protagonists than it does to the incident of the violence itself. Although *Heavenly Creatures* opens with a flash-forward to the murder scene, the main diegetic action begins when the protagonists, Juliet and Pauline, meet for the first time at their Christchurch high school in 1953. The pair bond over shared ailments and the music of American tenor Mario Lanza; subsequently, much of the film consists of a series of strongly affective scenes in which the girls play together. It is only after their relationship has reached a point of intense devotion that the pair contemplates murder; Pauline raises the possibility only fifteen minutes before the film actually ends.

By inserting lesbian characters into a love story, *Heavenly Creatures* also enacts a form of revisionism similar to the kind that B. Ruby Rich identified in the New Queer Cinema, a grouping of films that emerged in independent filmmaking and on the festival circuit during 1991 and 1992, including *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992) and *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1992). Although *Heavenly Creatures* is not technically part of the New Queer Cinema – it is not made by a gay or lesbian filmmaker and was released after the 1991 and 1992 festivals – its appropriation of romance does involve an intervention into cinematic convention that is characteristic of New Queer films. As Rich writes, New Queer films are involved in 'renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image' and engaging in a 'reworking of history' (1992: 31–2). *Heavenly Creatures* relocates the murderous woman, often a figure of film noir, horror or exploitation, to the genre of film romance. By thus expanding the romantic mode to include lesbian love, the film reconstitutes the violent lesbian as a subject of film romance.

Natural passions

One key ideological function of romance is its characterisation of love as a natural emotion, a strategy that *Heavenly Creatures* uses to untether same-sex desire from violence. Numerous horror and thriller films

characterise the lesbian's desire not as romantic per se, but rather as a destructive force that is contiguous with her unnatural pathology. Indeed, the 'perverseness' of lesbian desire is encapsulated neatly in the person of the vampire. Both *Daughters of Darkness* and *The Vampire Lovers* draw attention to Countess Bathory and Carmilla Karnstein's unnatural beauty; in *Daughters of Darkness*, for example, the hotel porter is shocked to find that he remembers Countess Bathory, unchanged, from a visit some forty years before. In *The Vampire Lovers*, the heroes discover a painting of Carmilla Karnstein in centuries-old attire, indicating that she has not aged in hundreds of years. The vampires' preserved looks serve as a reminder of the lesbian's transgression of the natural order. Similarly, the heroine's wasting illness following her enslavement to the lesbian vampire also indicates both the toxicity and violence of homosexual attraction.

In contrast, the depiction of same-sex desire in *Heavenly Creatures* aligns more closely with the characterisation of romantic love as essentially good and natural (Johnson 2005: 5).[2] The film's uniquely expressive, even hysterical, mise-en-scène plays a significant role in this process. *Heavenly Creatures* employs nature as a recurring visual motif and setting for the protagonists' desire. The strategy of associating love with nature occurs frequently in romance films – such as *Wuthering Heights* (Andrea Arnold, 2011), *The Notebook* (Nick Cassavetes, 2004), *The Bridges of Madison County* (Clint Eastwood, 1995) and *All that Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955) – as well as, as Koziak observes, *Brokeback Mountain*. Indeed, the tagline for both Arnold and Lee's movies, 'Love is a force of nature', applies equally well to *Heavenly Creatures*. The fecund New Zealand landscapes, Juliet's expansive garden and the Port Levy hillsides all work to situate their love within the natural world, unlike, for instance, the rotting Karnstein crypts of Styria (*The Vampire Lovers*), the concrete jailhouse (*The Big Doll House*) or the deserted resort town of Ostend (*Daughters of Darkness*) in earlier films about the violent lesbian.

Heavenly Creatures also frames love as a positive and generative emotion by linking it to the girls' creativity. The film's narrative very quickly establishes that Juliet and Pauline's favourite play activity involves writing and re-enacting short stories about imaginary worlds, such as the magical Kingdom of Borovnia and the heavenly afterlife of the Fourth World. These places clearly only exist in the girls' imaginations, yet the film frequently abandons its dominant realist aesthetic to segue into hyperreal, luridly coloured fantasy sequences that depict these locations onscreen. In one scene, the girls are shown entering the Fourth World on the rolling green hillsides of Port Levy in Canterbury (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Pauline and Juliet enter the Fourth World; *Heavenly Creatures* (1994)

As the girls run across the grass together, the turf literally morphs into a lush, manicured garden complete with unicorns and giant butterflies. Likewise, several fantasy sequences show Juliet and Pauline visiting the castle of Borovnia, a Camelot-like structure. This space is populated with Pauline's plasticine models of the Borovnian nobles, magically animated and grown to full size. The film's use of transitions and changes in lighting and visual aesthetic clearly demarcate these locations as fantasy spaces; however, by realising these locations onscreen, *Heavenly Creatures* constructs the girls' daydreams in a positive way, positioning them as vivid creations. It also gives them a physical 'reality', and therefore credence, in the context of the film.

The most pointed argument in favour of the naturalness of lesbian love in *Heavenly Creatures* occurs through its contrasting of same-sex desire with heteronormativity, which the film represents as decidedly unwholesome. At one point Pauline decides to lose her virginity by sleeping with a young man whom she meets at her parents' guesthouse. The sequence begins abruptly: a shot of the man shows him hovering over Pauline, breathing hoarsely and sweating. A reaction shot shows Pauline staring at the ceiling with a look of discomfort on her face. As it is represented in this sequence, heterosexual intercourse is awkward and unpleasant, even grotesque. In contrast, when Pauline and Juliet 're-enact' the love-making of the saints of the Fourth World, it is rendered as an erotic and sensual encounter. The pair embrace one another and gaze lovingly into each other's eyes and, unlike the scene between Pauline and the young man, the girls' encounter is animated with romantic purple light (a suggestive choice, given the association between the colour violet and the Greek poet Sappho). Other heterosexual relationships represented in *Heavenly Creatures* are equally unappealing. Although the Borovnian nobles Charles and Deborah represent an idealised model of married heterosexual love, the real-life relationships between Juliet and Pauline's parents belie this fantasy of happy heteronormativity. During an argument with Honora over Pauline's indiscretion with the lodger, Pauline reveals that she knows that her mother 'ran off' with her father at seventeen years of age. Pauline's awareness of her mother's transgression ensures that the young woman becomes even more resistant to parental discipline. Juliet's mother and father are also compromised in their relationship: Mrs Hulme (Diana Kent) is a marriage counsellor who has an affair with a client. When Juliet catches her mother in a sexual situation with the man, Mrs Hulme declares that the three adults are going to live together 'as a threesome' until a separation is arranged. Pauline and Juliet's devotion to one another is uncompromising in

comparison to these heterosexual role models. Indeed, heteronormative love in the film is complex and hypocritical, with the adults readily transgressing the sexual boundaries they set for others.

One particularly direct way that *Heavenly Creatures* ridicules heteronormativity and asserts the normality of same-sex desire is by overtly lampooning the adult characters' homophobia. Once it becomes clear that Pauline and Juliet are inseparable, Dr Hulme begins to suspect that 'trouble' may be developing between his daughter and her friend. The scene in which he announces this suspicion to Pauline's parents is choreographed in a way that openly mocks his anxiety. Struggling with the gravity of his suspicions, Dr Hulme stammers: 'Your daughter appears to have formed a rather . . .' – he hesitates as the camera dollies forward – '. . . *unwholesome* attachment to Juliet.' Upon uttering the world 'unwholesome', a bolt of lightning illuminates the scene and thunder rolls ominously. Dr Hulme's inability to utter the words 'homosexual' or 'lesbian' comes across as comically superstitious. Not even a psychologist hired to consult with Pauline can utter words pertaining to same-sex relationships easily. In a scene following Dr Hulme's visit, the psychologist's mouth, framed in extreme close-up, contorts several times before stuttering his diagnosis of 'homosexuality' to Pauline's mother. Pauline and Juliet, in contrast, have no such comical repression. When the pair 're-enact' sex with one another, Pauline writes in her diary that, 'It was wonderful, heavenly, beautiful, and ours . . . we've now learned the peace of the thing called bliss, the joy of the thing called sin!' Unlike the psychologist, Pauline does not – or perhaps, due to ignorance of the concept of lesbianism, cannot – name her desire as homosexual. Yet Pauline's voice freely articulates her emotions without shame. Her narration suggests that her love for Juliet is the same as that of the Borovnian nobles of her fantasies, not an aberration from normative sexuality.

This is not to say that *Heavenly Creatures* does not acknowledge the obsessiveness of the girls' relationship. As they are explained in the plot, Pauline and Juliet's motives could very easily be taken as evidence of their madness and obsession: the pair murder Honora Parker to avert their impending separation, an act premised on the girls' erroneous belief that the Hulmes would allow Pauline to move to South Africa with Juliet were Honora not in the way. Moreover, Juliet is characterised as bossy, vain and manipulative towards Pauline, which seems an unlikely basis for an equal romantic partnership. Yet *Heavenly Creatures* avoids making a causal connection between aggression and lesbianism per se. In vampire films such as *The Vampire Lovers* and *Daughters of*

Darkness, lesbianism is intrinsically connected to violence and exploitation; in these texts, the beautiful but deadly vampire resorts to aggressive means of dispensing with her rivals, attacking the young ingénue's lovers and protectors. In contrast, *Heavenly Creatures* represents the protagonists' love as all-consuming, mutual and simple, free from the complexity and hypocrisy of heterosexual life. The film emphasises the positive qualities of same-sex desire and characterises it (for the most part) as a productive, creative and energising force for Juliet and Pauline. Heterosexual characters seem foolish and markedly insincere in comparison to these free and authentic 'heavenly creatures'.

Victimisation and consecration

One of the strongest rhetorical means through which *Heavenly Creatures* constructs the violent lesbian is its use of romantic narrative schemas premised on victimisation. Loss, separation and sadness are dominant themes in the film; this strategy resembles traditional European romance narratives that position the protagonists in painful situations. Such suffering is not necessarily a consequence of deliberate persecution. Rather, lovers in traditional romance feel pain because their union is circumstantially and socially impossible. One of the lovers, for instance, may be married to a powerful community leader, such as the king (the story of Tristan and Isolde is once again an important progenitor of this trend in the Western tradition). The impediment to romantic fulfilment in this scenario is not merely the marriage itself, but also the powerful ideological demands for social cohesion that the marriage typically represents. Such obstructive social demands (and marriages) remain an important narrative device in romance stories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Films as diverse as *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), *The Bridges of Madison County* and *Lost in Translation* (Sofia Coppola, 2003) all utilise obstruction to accent romantic feeling, thus demonstrating that obstruction is an enduring trope. In *Casablanca*, Rick Blaine must relinquish Ilsa Lund so that she can support Victor Laszlo in his anti-war efforts; in *The Bridges of Madison County*, Francesca Johnson chooses the cohesion of her family over her lover, Robert Kincaid; and in *Lost in Translation*, Bob Harris refuses to compromise Charlotte's new marriage. Suffering and obstruction also serve an important rhetorical function insofar as characters can 'prove' their ardour by transgressing the social rules that separate them (often at significant personal cost). Romance usually frames such transgression as both positive and negative, 'ennobling' as well as 'sinful' (Shumway 2003: 3).

Heavenly Creatures similarly uses schemas of obstruction and victimisation to consecrate Pauline and Juliet's love, a strategy that recasts the girls' relationship as impressively committed. Historically, the 'lesbian vampire' horror film tends to position the lesbian as an opportunistic victimiser rather than a victim. *Daughters of Darkness*, *The Vampire Lovers*, *La Novia Ensangrentada* and *The Hunger* all see a mature woman prey upon a young ingénue. In *The Vampire Lovers*, for instance, Carmilla's corrupting lust for the heroine threatens to rob the young woman of her life and, implicitly, the chance to marry when she comes of age. Even in films that posit the vampire as a welcome alternative to sadistic men, for example *Daughters of Darkness* and *La Novia Ensangrentada*, the viability of lesbianism as an alternative is always marred by the vampire's opportunism, as she is far more ruthless than the man she challenges. In contrast, *Heavenly Creatures* constructs Pauline and Juliet as romantic victims rather than predators. Doctors, fathers and mothers are all figured as conspirators who separate the girls; moreover, like the obstructive forces in classic romance, they symbolise the demands of the broader community. The oppressiveness of parental intervention, for instance, is neatly communicated throughout the film. In one scene, Juliet and Pauline snuggle in bed after a rapturous day in each other's company; the camera then tilts to reveal Juliet's father peering voyeuristically at the pair. Lightning once again illuminates the scene as he looms over the two girls. Here, Dr Hulme is a spectre of patriarchal admonishment. This power is also enacted in scenes in which Pauline and Juliet are respectively lectured by a psychologist and a reverend. In both these sequences, expressive dolly zooms and close-ups portray the older men as loathsome and grotesque interlopers in the girls' relationship. Such moments characterise the romantic protagonists' love as embattled. They also attest to the girls' commitment to one another in spite of outside pressure – as Juliet declares, 'Only the *best people* fight against all obstacles in pursuit of happiness.'

By casting heteronormative authority figures as oppressors, *Heavenly Creatures* also positions homophobic social attitudes, rather than homosexuality itself, as the factor that precipitates Pauline and Juliet's violence. This manoeuvre contradicts the tendency in exploitation and popular film to characterise homosexual desire as a paired symptom of criminal incrimination. Vito Russo observes that popular cinema has historically represented homosexual love as dangerously obsessive (1987: 48–9), and some psychoanalytic theorisations of lesbian desire support this characterisation. As Anneke Smelik explains, Jacques Lacan

hypothesised that lesbian desire is fundamentally a narcissistic disorder of subjectivity. She writes:

> 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. (2004: 74)

Smelik argues that this theorisation of lesbian criminality explains (albeit inadequately) the protagonists' actions in films like *Heavenly Creatures* and Nancy Meckler's thematically similar film about lesbian desire, *Sister My Sister*, in which the homosexual protagonists also respond violently when threatened with separation (2004: 75). Certainly, *Heavenly Creatures* characterises the protagonists' love as obsessive. Moreover, although the film conveys the power of the girls' affection and satirises those who fear it, the fact of its excess is also made abundantly clear: the girls weep when apart and laugh ecstatically when reunited. Yet the romance narrative in *Heavenly Creatures* refigures this potentially negative characterisation of same-sex love. The plot foregrounds the forces that separate and victimise the protagonists, positioning homophobia as the 'original' violence that begets the girls' act of homicide. The romance narrative in *Heavenly Creatures* therefore 'disproves' the connection between lesbian desire and aggression.

Tragedy is another key trope of romance; in *Heavenly Creatures*, its function is closely related to the processes of obstruction and victimisation in the plot. Many romance narratives, both old and new, permanently separate the couple by death or exile at the story's conclusion. Lovers may experience separation through death (*Love Story* [Arthur Hiller, 1970] and *Titanic* [James Cameron, 1997]); restrictive cultural conventions (*Onegin* [Martha Fiennes, 1998] and *Far from Heaven* [Todd Haynes, 2002]); or incompatible lifestyles (*The Bodyguard* [Mick Jackson, 1992]). To use Koziak's words, in these films 'the apparent joy and euphoria of romantic love [is] also suffused with a sense of painful longing and grieving' (2009: n.p.). Although such tragic outcomes arguably present romantic love as a negative force – as unsustainable, a misfortune or a cruel twist of fate – dying for the sake of love also has an ideological function. Namely, death can be understood as the ultimate validation of romantic attachment. Death or exile suggests that the protagonists' love was too immense to be sustained in life. A thwarted romantic union can also leave the spectator with a feeling of loss on

behalf of the protagonists, as opposed to, in the case of *The Vampire Lovers* or *The Hunger*, a sense of relief that the vampire's lustful 'love' has been averted. The unhappy ending of *Heavenly Creatures* draws heavily on the convention of romantic tragedy to solicit the spectators' sympathy for Juliet and Pauline (although this sympathy is very likely to be tempered with condemnation for violent act). The film concludes with a series of title cards that inform the viewer of Pauline and Juliet's fate following Honora's death: 'Too young for the death penalty, they were sent to separate prisons to be "Detained at Her Majesty's Pleasure" . . . It was a condition of their release that they never meet again.' These words characterise the girls' separation as a tragic event.

By thus employing the culturally sanctioned discourse of romance, *Heavenly Creatures* is able to pose an alternative representation of lesbian love as wholesome and romantic rather than arcane and corrupting. This strategy is not beyond criticism, however. Feminists, queer scholars and critics more generally have described the victimisation of women in love stories as a form of ideological punishment. For instance, Andrea Weiss observes that, on the comparatively few occasions in which a lesbian lover is represented in film, she typically meets an unfortunate end by death or exile at the story's conclusion, thus ameliorating the threat she poses to heteronormativity. Mary Ann Doane makes the same observation about the desiring heterosexual heroine of film melodrama, who often dies or, at the very least, is denied the object of her desire (1987: 98, 104, 112). By inviting audiences to empathise with the romantic victim, lesbian romances such as *Heavenly Creatures* could be accused of positioning spectators to adopt the very form of masochistic viewership that Doane observed in melodrama, taking a kind of sorrowful pleasure in their loss (1987: 95). Another potential criticism of the film's use of romance is that it problematically conflates hetero- and homosexual desire. Rather than representing the violent lesbian as a 'secret' or enigma, *Heavenly Creatures* depicts Pauline and Juliet using the same methods by which heteronormative love and the heterosexual subject are culturally constructed. Violent lesbian subjectivity is thus made similar to, rather than different from, heteronormativity. As such, the 'secret' of lesbian desire in *Heavenly Creatures* is that it is no secret at all. Rather, it is the same emotion that audiences have seen many times over.

However, it is both possible and pertinent to take an alternative view of love and victimisation in *Heavenly Creatures*. While the protagonists' suffering does indeed allow for masochistic forms of viewing pleasure, it also works to refute a causal connection between same-sex desire and

murder – a relationship that exists explicitly in figurations of the lesbian vampire. It also refocuses viewers' attention back onto the forces that victimised the protagonists in the first instance. This strategy is particularly evident during the film's conclusion, in which the final title cards imply that the girls' final separation is guaranteed as much by law as it is by the era's homophobia: the phrase 'Detained at Her Majesty's Pleasure' alludes to a conservative social power that is intolerant of Pauline and Juliet's desire even after they have served their punishment. Moreover, although *Heavenly Creatures* does not attempt to represent same-sex love as experientially different to heterosexual love, this is arguably the precise point. *Heavenly Creatures* suggests that romance (and, indeed, the stories that communicate such emotions) is not the exclusive purview of heteronormativity. Rather, the romance narrative is a means by which everyone in the culture might express love and desire, a shared heritage. The film therefore posits a fundamental equivalence between the protagonists and 'other people' who populate the spectator's world – until, that is, the girls commit murder.

Intensities of love and desire

Although *Heavenly Creatures* is, for the majority of its running time, a story about love, the violent scene at the film's conclusion profoundly disrupts this romantic tone. The murder that Juliet and Pauline commit is brutal, intimate and difficult to watch. In keeping with the facts of the historical case, the girls bludgeon Honora Parker several times with a piece of brick until she dies. This scene also occasions a significant tonal shift: the mise-en-scène of romance becomes a brutal spectacle and the victimised girls become the victimisers. In essence, the murder scene in *Heavenly Creatures* interrupts and replaces the love story. In the words of Asbjørn Grønstad, violence 'punctures, or punctuates, the image . . . and also seems to pierce the process of narration itself' (2008: 13). Theorisations of romance narrative fall short of accounting for this effect.

One theory is that violence is part of the films' strategy to signify desire; a way of forging a unique cinematic language to convey lesbian experience. Indeed, Michele Aaron and B. Ruby Rich suggest that the affecting violence in films about killer lesbians might actually be constitutive of their love stories rather than a deviation from them. Discussing *Sister My Sister*, *Heavenly Creatures* and the thematically similar story of adolescent love *Fun*, Rich argues that the protagonists of such films 'bond their affections with blood' (1995: 60). Aaron

describes these violent acts as 'commitment ceremonies' (1999: 79). Writing specifically about *Sister My Sister*, she observes that the film is 'charged with excess and release' and filled with 'sexual echoes and tension' that are explosively released during the film's violent final scene (1999: 79). Her remarks apply equally well to *Heavenly Creatures* insofar as this film also employs a structure of rising tension, produced through elements of film style such as plot and pacing, that culminates in a catastrophic murder. Aaron concludes that violence in films such as *Sister My Sister* and *Heavenly Creatures* formally inscribes lesbian orgasm, but she also wonders whether the films as complete systems, rather than merely their murder scenes, could also convey lesbian experience (1999: 78–9).

Aaron ultimately leaves her question unanswered; however, Thomas Elsaesser's work on film viewership provides a way of theorising this precise issue in more detail, suggesting how to make sense of these moods and atmospheres as part of the films' project of conveying the protagonists' subjectivity. Writing on what he calls 'audience aesthetics', Elsaesser suggests that cinema positions spectators to affectively experience energies of excitement, boredom and intensity. This so-called 'psychic matrix' consists of the film-viewing situation – of being physically restrained and motionless in a darkened theatre – as well as the pacing, plot and mise-en-scène. Elsaesser observes that these qualities have the capacity to 'move' audiences, to immerse 'the spectator in a temporal sequence', to manage the spectator's psychic and physical energies during his or her viewing experience. This in turn determines how the spectator makes sense of what she or he sees on the screen (2011: 96, 97). This is not an incidental effect, but rather a product of how a text choreographs the spectator's affective engagement with the film.

Although Elsaesser avoids exploring the ideological consequences of a film's psychic matrix (namely to avoid complicating his strictly formal and phenomenological focus), I argue that a film's ability to thrill or bore can be employed as a means to inscribe subjectivity. The ability of *Heavenly Creatures* to engage the viewer through its expressive style fosters identification with the protagonists in terms of a shared intensity. The film uses its matrix to convey the protagonists' desire and aggression, communicating the violent lesbian's presence in the text and identifying the spectator more fully with her experience. Consequently, *Heavenly Creatures* is intrinsically dedicated to detailing the violent woman's emotional life rather than relegating her to the position of arcane enigma. In order to explore this process, I will backtrack

momentarily to consider how the love story also manages the spectator's affective intensities in ways that enable this kind of identification.

Although Aaron argues that killer lesbian films use violence to express lesbian eroticism, *Heavenly Creatures* conveys an affective sense of desire several times in the scenes preceding the murder. This is not simply in the moments that literally depict an erotic (or even sexual) event, such as when Juliet and Pauline dance in their underwear after a joyous bicycle ride through Christchurch. As Adrian Martin explains in his own reading of Elsaesser's work, '*every* kind of cinema is potentially erotic . . . if they activate some basic erotic structures within both the film-viewing situation and the particular formal aesthetics of a work' (2012: 522) (original emphasis). Mise-en-scène, music, scene duration and onscreen movement are all responsible for constructing eroticism in *Heavenly Creatures*. As a film particularly concerned with unspoken desire, the text conveys a range of erotic experience, such as emotional excess, frustration, tension and aggression. In doing so, *Heavenly Creatures* positions the spectator to take up the same affective intensities. The film's use of the music of Mario Lanza is one particularly prominent strategy. Music has a central role in cinematic love stories because it communicates the excess of feeling that the image cannot convey: 'Music has an anaphoric function, consistently pointing out that there is more than meaning, there is desire' (Doane 1987: 97). Immediately after Pauline first meets Juliet, she runs home to play a Lanza record on Juliet's recommendation. 'Be My Love', an expansive song of yearning and desire, is the first track. Lanza's music appears again very soon after this scene; 'The Donkey Serenade' forms the musical backdrop of a sequence in which the girls run and ride together through the Christchurch parklands. This scene invites a physical engagement from the spectator. With the camera and the girls perpetually moving through the colourful and lush woods, there is an onscreen and aural excess that signifies the girls' thrilling, romantic companionship. According to Elsaesser, the spectator, when subjected to 'montage and action', identifies *bodily* with the energy of the film: 'the artificial rhythm thus imposed (the film's "heartbeat") locks into the spectator's physiological disposition (the audience's "heartbeat")' (2011: 98). Doane makes a similar observation that is particularly apt given the use of Lanza's arias in *Heavenly Creatures*, arguing that music is part of the love story's strategy to encourage the spectator's emotional surrender to the film. The love story is 'opportunistic in its manipulation of affect in an attempt to fully engage the spectator, binding him/her too closely to its discourse' (1987: 97).

Although Doane describes a psychic rather than a physical binding, these intense emotional moments engage the body's energies. They position the spectator to 'live the part'; to run, ride and dance along with the girls onscreen. Through this aural and visual excess and dynamism, *Heavenly Creatures* facilitates an intensely personal form of identification, reproducing the protagonists' exhilarated and vivacious energy. Not only does this convey the protagonists' innermost experience; it situates the spectator affectively and emotionally *within* the characters' eroticism.

Oppression and entrapment

Heavenly Creatures creates an affective mode of viewing in order to immerse the spectator in the protagonists' romantic experience. Love, however, is not the only intensity expressed in the film. Aaron notes that the queer films of the early 1990s revisit the historic past in order to explain the circumstances that brought about the gay characters' violence, such as their rage, oppression and victimisation (2004: 69). A film such as *Sister My Sister*, for example, expands upon the details of housemaids Christine and Léa Papin's real-life murder of their employer, emphasising the emotional dynamic between the perpetrators and the extent of their mistress's cruel mistreatment of them. In *Heavenly Creatures*, such revisionism is partly enacted through the plot. The narrative accounts for the protagonists' violent outburst by focusing on the circumstances that precipitate their violence, particularly Dr Hulme's homophobic pathologisation of the girls' relationship and Honora Parker's interference in their friendship. However, *Heavenly Creatures* also expresses Juliet and Pauline's more negative emotions through the processes of spectatorship it initiates. The film creates a viewing experience that mimics the girls' feelings of oppression. It reaches out and envelops the viewer, constructing highly affecting scenes that convey a sense of both entrapment and anger.

Heavenly Creatures accomplishes this effect largely through its mise-en-scène, kinetic style and organisation of space. Just as the film's expressive style communicates the visceral thrill of love, the organisation of light, colour and framing induce an oppressive, stultifying sense in the onlooker, an effect that operates in concert with the film's narrative of romantic victimisation. One way that the film accomplishes this is by showing social power to be a physically coercive force. Exercised by doctors, schoolteachers and parents, power in *Heavenly Creatures* manifests as a literal control of the girls' bodies. One dominant manifestation

of this control is the act of separation. In keeping with the conventions of narrative romance, Pauline and Juliet are repeatedly removed, or threatened with removal, from one another, and this manipulation of the characters' bodies recurs to the point of motif in the film. For example, fairly early on in their friendship, Juliet suffers a relapse of her tuberculosis. The Hulmes admit her to hospital to recuperate, and Pauline is forbidden from visiting for at least two months. This restriction distresses Pauline so much that she refuses to eat or leave her bedroom; the girls' reunion, accordingly, unfolds as a moment of elation, with Pauline reciting a poem in voice-over in which she names herself and Juliet as 'heavenly creatures' and 'glorious beings'. Later in the film, Pauline is once again restricted from interacting with Juliet by Honora, who is concerned about her daughter's bulimia. As Pauline explains in voice-over, 'She said that if my health did not improve, I could never see the Hulmes again . . . Life would be unbearable without Deborah [Juliet].' The two girls are separated for a third and final time when they are incarcerated following Honora's murder. The film's final scene expresses the finality of this separation by intercutting the moment of Honora's death with images of a passenger boat bearing Juliet away. Pauline runs along the jetty below, but she is powerless to halt the boat's departure. The actresses' performances in this scene express the combined emotional and physical dimension of their separation; Juliet and Pauline cry, call and reach out to one another. The power of the law, however, is as irresistible as the departure of the passenger boat.

These scenes in *Heavenly Creatures* do not just visually suggest social control; sets, framing and pacing build a viewing experience that effects a sense of physical oppression. Soon after Pauline is caught in bed with the guesthouse lodger, for instance, Honora moves her into the main house where she can be more closely supervised. The dim lighting used in this part of the film represents the house – particularly Pauline's bedroom – as a dark and confined space (Figure 4.2). In contrast to the luridly bright colours of Borovnia or the Fourth World, the rooms are murkily coloured with brown and saturated greys. Tight framing creates a claustrophobia that contrasts with the wide, sweeping shots in the earlier scenes at Port Levy and the Christchurch countryside. Such an aesthetic constructs parental authority as a diffuse, indirect kind of physical violence and control of the girls' bodies. In Michel Foucault's words, the film aims to show the protagonists as 'caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions . . . an economy of suspended rights … that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations' (1979: 11, 16). Through

its expressive mise-en-scène and recurring motifs, *Heavenly Creatures* represents power as a diffuse, insidious force; these moments arrest the spectator's eye and body, subjecting viewers to the same stultifying sensation that the girls endure.

Importantly, *Heavenly Creatures* does not create a viewing experience that solely conveys the controlling forces of homophobia. The film also communicates the protagonists' specifically adolescent feelings of resentment; indeed, homophobia, medical and parental authority are interlinked in the film. Much of Pauline's sense of victimhood comes from her mother's attempts to address her daughter's rude behaviour rather than to enforce heterosexuality per se. Indeed, Pauline's resentment of her mother's authority is particularly well conveyed in a scene where Honora lectures Pauline for the mundane transgression of spending too long in the bathtub. In this moment, Honora's stern mouth is framed in close-up, abstracting her into a disembodied organ of maternal discipline. This is not to say that the parents' homophobia is not implicated in their acts of authority; the adults regularly threaten to censure their daughters in ways that are either overtly or implicitly homophobic. At one point, for instance, Dr Hulme assumes that Pauline and Juliet are taking pornographic photographs of one another in the bathroom (they are, in fact, posing for glamour portraits to send to Hollywood executives). Outraged, Dr Hulme declares to his wife that he will not tolerate such 'hanky-panky' in his household. Homophobia and parental authority are therefore interlinked, with Dr Hulme's hysteria over the former aggravating his paternal anxiety. Nevertheless, *Heavenly Creatures* is an illustration of teenage resentment of authority as much as a depiction of conservative, 1950s-era prejudice.

Figure 4.2 Claustrophobic mise-en-scène; *Heavenly Creatures* (1994)

Along with its stultifying and oppressive moments, *Heavenly Creatures* also constructs a much darker schema of aggressive stress centred on the violent murder. For much of the film's duration, it adopts a fast pace in terms of edits and onscreen movement. However, this pacing drops noticeably prior to Honora Parker's death. In the scenes immediately preceding the murder, the fluid, dynamic movement that has characterised the editing and onscreen positioning of characters literally slows. As they walk through the parklands where they intend to kill Honora, Juliet and Pauline's physicality becomes stiff and measured (in earlier scenes, such bushland setting operated as space for the girls' fast, fluid and uninhibited physical expression). Following a meaningful glance from Pauline, Juliet drops a purple gemstone onto the muddy trail – the look between the two girls clearly indicates that they have pre-planned this manoeuvre to signal the commencement of their violent act. Almost immediately after the gem falls, Honora checks her wristwatch and declares it is time to go home. All three characters turn to walk back up the trail – Honora looks down, bends over and slowly reaches for the gemstone. As she does this, Pauline pulls the murder weapon from her satchel. The actresses' deliberate performances have an affective consequence for the spectator, giving a tense and arrested mood to the scene. This also lengthens the scene duration precisely because the performances are so stilted, stalling the fluid pacing that the two girls' relaxed performances earlier have established. Elsaesser's analogy of the film's 'heartbeat' is once again appropriate here, in that the murder scene in *Heavenly Creatures* sets a particular pace and energy that corresponds with the pace and energy of the protagonists onscreen. When Pauline hits her mother over the head, this tension is immediately released: the girls begin screaming, the camera moves more rapidly and the shots are far shorter in duration. In other words, the use of tone and tension draws the spectator into affective identification with Pauline and Juliet, conveying the girls' inner state and tension. Of course, because these filmic strategies position the viewer to inhabit the protagonists' aggressive impulses, it is arguably a deeply disturbing position for a spectator to be in. [3]

Managing the spectators' affect in this way, *Heavenly Creatures* is able to communicate the protagonists' experience: to enable identification in terms of shared emotional intensity. It therefore provides the spectator with a privileged insight into the inner life of the violent protagonists that is uncommon in the popular genre of lesbian vampire films. Perhaps counterproductively, the way that *Heavenly Creatures* situates murder as a point of affective release potentially characterises same-sex

desire as aggressive, brutal and destructive, therefore reiterating the cliché of the violent homosexual (Russo 1987: 48–9). Looking at the narrative detail, however, reveals that *Heavenly Creatures* does not make a straightforward analogy between violence and sexual climax. Firstly, Pauline and Juliet *do* consummate their desire by engaging in sexual activity with one another. While the scene does retain some ambiguity – it is unclear, for example, whether Pauline and Juliet are play-acting or sincere when they 'make love in bed' together – the scene quite clearly allows for the possibility of genuine lesbian eroticism by showing the girls passionately kiss and caress one another. Whether it shows heterosexual fantasy or homosexual reality, the scene demonstrates that Juliet and Pauline do achieve some form of sexual release. This being the case, the argument that violence is a stand-in for the repressed lesbian orgasm is problematic. Secondly, desire is conveyed by the *entire* film, not just in the moments of violence. If lesbian eroticism is displaced, it is displaced onto many parts of the film, not just the murder scene. As such, the holistic regimes of affect in *Heavenly Creatures* identify the spectator with the killer lesbian subjects, conveying their desire and aggression throughout the film's duration.

Conclusion

Through the functions of romance and identification, *Heavenly Creatures* communicates the violent lesbian's subjectivity and identifies spectators with her experiences. As Julie Burchill writes:

> As Juliet and Pauline go in at the deep end in slo-mo, rejecting the russet rusticity of real life for the Singing Ringing Tree hyper-reality of their imaginary kingdom, Borovnia, we go with them all the way. When the vicars and doctors tell us we should 'spend more time with boys', we rejoice in Juliet's imaginary executions. When the girls finally make love, we feel the blissed-out afterglow so strongly that we want a cigarette. And when they kill Pauline's blameless, banal mother, very badly, we feel both her agony and theirs. (1995: 6)

As this comment suggests, Pauline and Juliet do not appear onscreen as mysterious enigmas, nor are they elided or rendered a 'secret' by the ideological mechanisms of cinema. Instead, *Heavenly Creatures* has a different impulse. It opposes earlier iterations of the lesbian murderess as an arcane figure by securing the spectator's allegiance with the protagonists at all times. As Aaron explains, the film also insists that homosexuality

and violence are not implicated, but that the two phenomena 'coexist within a world determined to so implicate them' (1999: 68). Unlike the lesbian vampire, Juliet and Pauline have no inherent aptitude for violence.

In keeping with my arguments throughout this book, the representation of women's violence in *Heavenly Creatures* is underpinned by two factors. Firstly, as signalled by the important flash-forward to Honora's murder at the beginning of the film, *Heavenly Creatures* is motivated by a structuring desire to know the violent woman: to comprehend her motivations and discover her subjectivity. Secondly, the film's textual regimes respond to this impetus. *Heavenly Creatures* establishes Pauline and Juliet's motives in its narrative and inscribes their experience via the film-viewing situation. The film accomplishes this chiefly through a process of ideological sanctioning (through the use of romance discourse) and identification (via the affective dimensions of viewership). These strategies align *Heavenly Creatures* to some degree with the independent biographical film *Monster*, which I explore in the next chapter. Like *Heavenly Creatures*, *Monster* also mobilises the discourse of love and the rhetorical power of identification to produce the female killer onscreen (although, as the following chapter explains, *Monster* uses melodrama rather than romance to provide an emotional context for women's violence).

The expressiveness of *Heavenly Creatures* does, however, raise the question as to whether the film participates in the aggressive impulse to 'reveal' female subjectivity that governs classical film texts (particularly those in the noir, neo-noir and 'lesbian vampire' cycles that position the violent woman as an object of male hermeneutic investigation). Given that *Heavenly Creatures* premiered shortly after the 'New Queer' texts of 1991 and 1992, it is possible to query whether the film merely procures transgressive lesbian subjectivity for an assumed heteronormative audience in a film season where queer cinema was fashionable. Certainly, there is some evidence to suggest that *Heavenly Creatures* occasionally departs from its protagonists' point of view to position the spectator as an onlooker who is *not* identified with Pauline and Juliet. Although the moment where Pauline's doctor diagnoses 'female homosexuality' is intended to be humorous, for example, it nonetheless invites spectators to scrutinise Pauline and reflect upon her possible inclinations. Consequently, viewers do not necessarily inhabit the girls' experience at all times, but instead oscillate between identification and objectification.

Taken holistically, however, *Heavenly Creatures* best resembles Burchill's enthusiastic assessment – spectators 'go with' Juliet and Pauline 'all the way'. While the film is indeed characterised by its clear desire to know the violent woman – and to know why the notorious Parker-Hulme murder took place – it aspires to a form of representation that attempts to bridge this divide and locate the spectator directly within the killer lesbians' experience. Like its New Queer Cinema contemporaries, the film engages in a sincere 'reworking of history', offering answers to the questions surrounding this infamous real-life murder case (Rich 1992: 32). *Heavenly Creatures* identifies the spectator firmly with the protagonists' world, showing a place wherein parents seem foolish, where love brings much-needed respite from the world's tedium, and where violence seems the only answer to unbearable situations.

5
Film Biography and the Female Killer: *Monster*

Not all films featuring the violent woman concern the kind of imaginary predators seen in *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis, 2001), the fictional murderesses of *Baise-moi* (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000) or disturbed protagonist of *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009). Women who kill also appear as 'real' people in biographical films or 'biopics': defined by George F. Custen as texts that dramatise 'the life of a historical person, past or present' (1992: 5). Films such as *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994), *Sister My Sister* (Nancy Meckler, 1994), *To Die For* (Gus van Sant, 1995), *I Shot Andy Warhol* (Mary Harron, 1996), *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003), *Der Baader Meinhoff Komplex* (Uli Edel, 2008) and *The Countess* (Julie Delpy, 2009) all recreate the lives of violent women who exist, or once existed, in the historical world.

Film biographies occupy a complex position in the taste economies of upper-middle-class urban film culture. Historically, biopics have not been strongly characterised as a particularly artistic mode of cinema. On the contrary, as Dennis Bingham notes, the genre's detractors frequently describe biopics as an aesthetically staid mode (2010: 12–13). While the past decade has seen a proliferation of stylistically innovative biopics, such as *Bright Star* (Jane Campion, 2009), *I'm Not There* (Todd Haynes, 2007) and *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008), the form has historically been associated with mainstream Hollywood aesthetics and modes of production. Film biography was ubiquitous and popular in the American studio era (Custen calculates that the major studios produced over three hundred biopics during Hollywood's classical age from 1927–60) and, indeed, biographies continue to be successful in contemporary mainstream cinema (1992: 3).[1] On the other hand, while biopics have not historically possessed the same kind of art film cachet as the films mentioned in the preceding chapters of this book, the genre

has its own form of distinction that differentiates it from other popular genres. Biopics are an epistemophilic form, inviting the spectator to be curious about the individual's life. Biopics also emphasise character: just as David Bordwell said of the art film, they are a cinema of 'psychological effects in search of their causes', although this 'search' may take place through very different textual means (1979: 58). Finally, biopics serve an industrial function that is analogous to the classical 'prestige picture', defined by *Time* as films that draw upon the best resources of the mainstream industry – such as star actors, respected directors and skilled production designers – to please 'serious critics', 'stimulate the self-respect' and generally improve the image of all who are involved in its production (1937: 34). Biopics therefore possess a form of aesthetic respectability by virtue of their industrial role as quality mainstream films.

Although comparatively few films portray homicidal women's lives, the biopic's interest in an individual's story means that it is well placed to explore the troubling question of 'real' female violence – that is to say, violence as it is committed by women who once occupied the same historical world that audiences identify as their own. These are films that, as film critic Jim Schembri writes, must 'reveal the soul of a character' and discover the essence of that person's identity (2012: n.p.). As I have argued in preceding chapters, narrative films (particularly those in the genres of film noir and the lesbian vampire film) frequently elide the subjectivity of the woman who commits acts of violence or, if she is represented, depict her as 'esoteric content' in order to symbolise the gap in discourse that she represents (Hart 1994: ix). In contrast, Bingham, Custen and Carolyn Anderson all acknowledge that traditional film biographies aim to explain personhood via the mechanisms of the text. For instance, although Custen's work chiefly investigates how biographical cinema produces popular history, he acknowledges that biopics must first fully expose the precise nature of the individual who effects these public events (1992: 19). Anderson and Bingham agree. Anderson writes that 'Biography provides an excellent vehicle for presenting a social issue or a historical era in personal terms' (1988: 340); Bingham argues that the appeal of biographies 'lies in seeing an actual person who did something interesting in life, known mostly in public, transformed into a character' (2010: 10). A key pleasure of biopics therefore resides in seeing a 'real' human life reconstructed via the mechanisms of plot and narrative.

From this brief overview, several qualities of the biopic present themselves as likely focal points for this chapter's investigation of how the

subjectivity of a 'real' violent woman is expressed within this domain of film culture. First, these scholars' accounts posit that a key textual function of the biopic – in its most normative manifestation – is to coherently map the individual's life. Many biopics fulfil the impetus to explain the subject's famed deeds, connecting these actions with other, more private biographical information in the narrative. Second, unlike a film such as *Antichrist*, which reflexively destabilises the truth-value of its representations, biopics like *Monster*, *Sister My Sister* and *I Shot Andy Warhol* construct the spectator's gaze as trustworthy, omniscient and able to examine any part of the character's life. Biopics therefore figure spectatorship as a reliable means of accessing – in terms of witnessing – the protagonists' life experiences as produced by plot.

As such, this chapter examines the plot manoeuvres that inscribe the violent woman's subjectivity within the biographical mode. Several films that dramatise 'real' homicidal women's lives fit, either aesthetically or industrially, within the category of art or independent film: these include *Sister My Sister*, which recounts Christine and Léa Papin's murder of their employer in Le Mans in 1933; *I Shot Andy Warhol*, which depicts Valerie Solanas's attempted murder of Andy Warhol in New York in 1968; and *Heavenly Creatures*, the tale of Christchurch murderers Juliet Hulme and Pauline Parker examined in the previous chapter. This chapter, however, takes independent film *Monster* as its key case study. The film examines a specific period in the life of American woman Aileen Wuornos – played in the film by Charlize Theron – a prostitute who was convicted of killing and robbing six of her johns between 1989 and 1990. Wuornos was a particularly transgressive figure; she was often homeless, maintained a lesbian relationship, and worked as a prostitute on the Florida highways. After her arrest, media reports (erroneously) dubbed Wuornos 'America's first female serial killer' (Russell cited in Morrissey 2003: 39). Although Wuornos claimed that each killing was an act of self-defence, she was sentenced to death and executed by lethal injection in Florida in 2002. I have chosen *Monster* out of the biographical films listed above because it typifies the kind of characteristics that Custen, Anderson, Bingham and Jonathan Lupo identify as normative of the classical biopic. That is to say, the film mobilises plot and causation to give a coherent account of Wuornos's life for the spectator's pleasure, inscribing an omniscient and omnipresent gaze in the process. *Monster* also directly addresses the troubling fact of female aggression as it emerges in the historical world, conducting in-depth investigations of the circumstances of the protagonist's violence and the origins of female criminality.

The first section of this chapter examines how the biographical narrative structure of *Monster* produces the violent woman as a subject produced in and by a pre-existing social world. I consider how the film's selection and emplotment of Wuornos's life story generally conforms to 'classical' narrative style as described by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson (1988). *Monster* adheres to an overarching chronological structure and telos, adopting continuity editing and announcing causal connections between events as a means of making sense of the life that it shows. However, as Bingham, Anderson and Lupo note, biopics also frequently adopt the conventions of other genres, such as the musical or crime film. Hence, in the second part of this chapter, I focus on how *Monster* also produces the violent female subject through the aesthetic strategies of film melodrama. By noting how the film's narrative tropes mirror those commonly found in maternal melodrama, it is possible to see how melodrama facilitates *Monster*'s broader biopic structure and maps its protagonist's criminality onto normative feminine motivations.

A worthy life

Monster dramatises a specific period in Aileen Wuornos's life, focusing on her relationship with Selby Wall (a fictionalised version of Wuornos's real-life girlfriend, Tyria Moore, played by Christina Ricci). The film begins with an introductory montage – narrated in voice-over by Theron in character – in which Aileen introduces herself to the audience. 'I always wanted to be in the movies,' she says. 'When I was little I thought: for sure, one day, I could be a big, big star. Or maybe just beautiful. Beautiful and rich, like the women on TV.' Yet, after this opening scene, the film very quickly illustrates the inevitable outcome of Wuornos's life. A cut to the diegetic present shows Aileen sitting under a highway bridge: it is raining, she is destitute and clearly contemplating suicide. Before doing so, however, she goes to a local bar and meets Selby Wall, and the two women begin a romantic relationship. Shortly after meeting Selby, however, Aileen is violently raped and beaten by a john (a fictionalised version of Wuornos's first victim, Richard Mallory). Aileen manages to shoot him in self-defence; however, the trauma of the experience leaves her unable to face returning to prostitution. Consequently, Aileen resorts to homicide, stealing from the men who approach her for sex and using the money to support Selby. Although she is initially horrified, Selby accepts Aileen's justifications. Eventually, the police arrest Aileen shortly after she accidentally kills an off-duty

police officer. Selby is also apprehended; however, in order to secure a deal with the prosecutors, she betrays Aileen by attempting to trick her into admitting to the murders during a taped telephone call. Aileen realises the ploy but confesses anyway, thus saving Selby from punishment. The film concludes as Aileen is sentenced to death by lethal injection.

Before investigating the specific narrative techniques that *Monster* uses to depict violent femininity, it is worth noting that it is significant that a biopic about Aileen Wuornos should have been made at all. On one hand, the film's representation of a transgressive person is not especially noteworthy. Such individuals surface regularly in contemporary biographies, and the past decade has seen the release of several ironic, unconventional 'anti' biopics, defined by screenwriters Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski as 'a movie about somebody who doesn't deserve one' (1999: vii). For example, *The Notorious Bettie Page* (Mary Harron, 2005) retells the story of pin-up model Bettie Page; *Lovelace* (Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, 2013) concerns pornography actor Linda Boreman's career; and *Bronson* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2008) recounts the life of violent offender Michael Gordon Peterson. Viewed within the biopic's broader history as a genre, however, the depiction of Aileen Wuornos (and indeed the depiction of these other controversial characters) is noteworthy. As Anderson and Lupo explain, the classical film biography was frequently a hagiographic form or, at the very least, a genre that announced the significance of the life it showed (2008: 102). For Bingham, the paradigmatic hagiographic biopic is the 'Great Man' film – a mode that extends from classical texts such as *Rembrandt* (Alexander Korda, 1936), to more contemporary biopics such as *Milk* (Gus Van Sant, 2008). As Bingham asserts, 'The biopic narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world' (2010: 10). Indeed, the tendency to retell 'good' lives lived by 'special' people is so entrenched that it also appears in the literary form; written biographies (particularly those of men) primarily focus on public accomplishments and success instead of failure or criminality (Wagner-Martin 1994: 6–7).[2]

Given the genre's hagiographic impulse, the making of biographies operates in part as a cultural practice that sanctions particular lives, deeds and subjectivities. As Custen puts it, 'The Hollywood biographical film created and still creates public history by declaring, through production and distribution, which lives are acceptable subjects' (1992: 12). By filming a biography about the life of a transgressive and impoverished woman, *Monster* not only subverts the conventions of hagiographic biography. It also poses Wuornos in terms of a symbolic

equivalence to the typical biopic film subject. Although this act does not address the violent woman's problematic subjectivity in and of itself, it does counteract the effacement of violent women from the genre. In the simplest sense, *Monster* suggests that Wuornos's life as a violent woman is worth telling, and it promotes visibility for the marginalised identities that Wuornos represents as a sex worker, gay woman and itinerant person. This not a claim that can be made for all biopics about violent women, however. Films like *The Countess* and *To Die For* also suggest the significance of the lives they show, but they characterise their violent female characters according to clichés of the monstrous feminine and *femme fatale* figures. Ambitious newsreader Suzanne Stone in *To Die For* sexually manipulates men into killing her rivals, and *The Countess* characterises Erzsébet Báthory as a shrewd aristocrat driven to homicidal madness by the loss of her looks. As such, these two biopics undoubtedly participate in the kind of narrative that characterises violent women as insane, erotomaniacs or frustrated by their inability to please men (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 37, 47). Nevertheless, by inserting Aileen Wuornos into popular history and narrative, *Monster* openly positions its violent female protagonist in terms of an equivalence to, rather than difference from, other biographical figures.

Narrative, causality and the biographical subject

Monster employs several narrative tropes to demystify Wuornos's violence and coherently produce her personhood. As I have observed in preceding chapters, prevailing cultural narratives persistently represent the homicidal woman as an unknown entity or enigma. The depiction of Aileen Wuornos in *Monster*, however, is underpinned by precisely the opposite impulse. By way of its narrative and strategies of characterisation, the film endeavours to explain Wuornos's criminal behaviour, delineating the psychological motivations behind her violent actions. This overarching impetus to 'impart' the subject is a common (but not universal) trait of biography. As Linda Wagner-Martin summarises, 'it is a given that biography attempts to find explanations for a subject's acts' (1994: 7), and Bingham also describes biopics as a genre that textually produces the famous person for the spectator's pleasure (2010: 10). In other words, biographical filmmaking and viewership frequently centre on the desire for knowledge of an individual life.[3]

Researchers such as Custen, Anderson and Lupo, however, do not explain exactly *which* model of subjectivity is made possible through the biopic's textual mechanisms or how the spectator is positioned to

accept this as a legitimate account of personhood. Custen argues that biopics make 'the lives of the famous fit particular contours' (1992: 4); Anderson and Lupo note that biopics are 'constructed to reveal the centre of a subject's life as a dramatic climax' (2008: 102–3). What these comments indicate is that, at least for the kind of films discussed by Custen, Anderson and Lupo, popular biopics produce the subject through their adherence to classical narrative causality, a manoeuvre that conceptualises selfhood as continuously produced and modified by the social world. By way of comparison, this schema differs with what Stuart Hall calls the 'Enlightenment' theory of subjectivity, which proposes that the subject possesses an 'inner core which first emerged when the subject was born, and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same – continuous or "identical" with itself – throughout the individual's existence' (1992: 275). A 'sociological' view, in contrast, postulates that, while the individual 'still has an inner core', the subject is also changeable under the influence of formative outside experiences (1992: 276). Consequently, biopics that adhere to classical form emphasise the teleological unfolding of life events, mapping an individual's experience onto a linear, chronological structure. This being the case, narrative is particularly important in the conversion of a life – with all its complexities and irregularities – into a story that contextualises a subject's deeds.

In *Monster*, the use of classical narrative form produces Aileen Wuornos according to a broadly socially determined view of subjectivity. The film adopts what Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, in their account of the Hollywood mode, call 'character centred – i.e., personal or psychological' plot causality and motivation: life events are both precipitated by and act upon the characters, who are in turn imbued with motivation for further action (1988: 13). Character-centred causality draws connections between life events and establishes motivation through storytelling, therefore representing the subject as produced in and by a pre-existing world. In keeping with this, narrative form in *Monster* textually establishes – as well as positions spectators to infer – close causal connections between Wuornos's personal history and her violent deeds. This occurs chiefly by way of modelling her life onto a teleological plot structure via typical biopic textual devices. For instance, although *Monster* focuses on a small period of time in Aileen's adult life, the film also contains a flashback that provides access to her youth. The film's opening scene begins with a title card displaying the words 'Based on a true story' before cutting to a black screen. Wuornos begins speaking in voice-over – 'I always wanted to be in the movies' – and

the montage that follows shows Aileen's early years, beginning with an image of a five-year-old girl, dressed in an adult woman's jewellery, smiling in front of a mirror. The image is small and grainy, indicating its temporal distance in relation to the film's main diegetic action. The montage continues by showing Aileen's lonely life as a teenager. As the voice-over explains, she entertains fantasies of overcoming her disadvantage to achieve financial security and personal success: 'It made me happy to think that all these people just didn't know yet who I was going to be,' she says.

This kind of scene is a common device in film biography that fulfils several purposes. First, it functions as what Anderson and Lupo call a 'tease' – a line of dialogue or a scene that encourages spectators to feel curious about the life represented onscreen (2008: 104). Teases do not necessarily provide biographical information in and of themselves; rather, their role is to create a gap in the spectator's knowledge and to position viewers into a desiring state of curiosity about the biographical subject. One paradigmatic tease is Charles Foster Kane's dying word, 'Rosebud', from Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), although many other examples can be found in contemporary biopics. The opening scene of *Heavenly Creatures*, for instance, contains a tease in the form of a flash-forward to the moments after Honora Parker's death. In a similar vein, *I Shot Andy Warhol* and *Sister My Sister* begin with flash-forwards to the bloody aftermath of the protagonists' violence before travelling back in time to the circumstances leading up to it. While the opening scene of *Monster* is not nearly as dramatic as these examples, the film does begin with an arresting statement: 'I always wanted to be in the movies.' By beginning without introducing the speaker, the film raises a small but significant narrative enigma: who is the 'I' who speaks? On one hand, from the context of the address, it is likely that viewers will assume that it is the protagonist's voice. Indeed, given the absence of information concerning the identity of the 'I', the voice-over hails the viewer as if he or she already has some idea whose life they are watching. This may well be the case; the historical Wuornos achieved a degree of notoriety prior to the film's release. Since her arrest in 1992, Wuornos has been discussed in both the media and in academic discourse and, at the time of the film's release in 2003, there was already widespread public curiosity about her. She is also the subject of two documentaries, *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (Nick Broomfield, 1994; 2003), and a made-for-television movie, *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story* (Peter Levin, 1992). As such, the viewer's curiosity about Aileen Wuornos might indeed precede the film. Nevertheless, the

film's exposition quite explicitly hints at the incompleteness of the spectator's knowledge about her, establishing a tone of intimacy that implies *Monster* will reveal hitherto unknown information.

Second, the expository flashback in *Monster* also functions as a narrative cue that indicates how spectators should interpret the subsequent narrative action. Anderson and Lupo argue that expository flashbacks that show the biographical subject's childhood function to position his or her past in a relationship of causal significance to the main narrative action. Such scenes, they write, provide 'access to understanding a person's background, social formations, and psyche'; they also set up '*the conditions of causality*, in which adult behaviour is explained through childhood or adolescent experiences, especially traumatic ones' (2008: 104) (my emphasis). Additionally, according to Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, flashbacks in classical cinema can almost always be assimilated into the broader cause-effect logic of the film (1988: 43). Due to this pre-existing reading strategy, spectators are therefore likely to assume that excursions into the past have causal significance to the primary narrative timeline (an effect that is likely intensified in the biopic, given its discursive construction as a mode that 'reveals' the subject). Following this logic, the introductory flashback of *Monster* therefore assumes particular narrative importance, linking Aileen's childhood experiences to her behaviour in the film's main action – especially her criminal violence, her prostitution and sexual orientation. The montage shows Aileen's overbearing guardians, social exclusion from her peers, poverty, sexual mistreatment and eventual despondency. Tellingly, it also dramatises her 'descent' into prostitution. In one scene, a young Aileen shows her breasts to a group of teenage boys in exchange for a few dollars; Aileen smiles at one of them, but he runs away once his curiosity has been satisfied. In a following scene, Aileen receives payment, unexpectedly, after performing a sexual act for an adult man in the front seat of his car; he roughly ejects her when she refuses to leave. In both instances, Aileen seems surprised to be so gracelessly discarded, suggesting that her eventual dependence on prostitution for subsistence originated from her naïve attempts to engage meaningfully with men. By showing these scenes and highlighting them as significant moments, *Monster* initiates a hermeneutic mode of reading, positioning the spectator as an investigator into the violent woman's life. The flashback also evokes, albeit simplistically, a psychological orthodoxy that links childhood abuse and neglect with criminal tendency (Widom 1989: 260).

In addition to establishing childhood aetiologies for Wuornos's transgressive behaviour, *Monster* also plots the main diegetic action – that

is, the action that occurs in the protagonist's adulthood – as causally implicated in her violence. Specifically, the film positions Aileen's criminality as a consequence of a particularly traumatic encounter with a male client (a fictionalised version of Wuornos's real first victim, Richard Mallory). In this scene, the john drives Aileen into the woods next to the highway, beats her and ties her hands to the door of his car. After the john threatens her life, Aileen wrestles her hands free, discovers a handgun in the front of the car and shoots her attacker several times. The scene holds a place of key narrative significance; it takes place approximately twenty minutes into the film, signalling the end of the set-up and the beginning of the main action. Later scenes in the film also refer to this event as a key influence on Aileen's later acts of violence. Aileen herself describes the encounter as a moment that loosened her inhibitions about murder. 'The thing so horrible you can't even imagine it,' she says, 'is usually a lot easier than you think' – the 'thing', that is to say, being murder. The dialogue also implies that the encounter with Mallory is a psychological trauma that pits Aileen permanently against her johns. In one scene midway through the film, Aileen is shown recalling the initial abuse in order to ready herself for murder, asking a new john if he is going to hit her or inflict sexual violence upon her. While there is certainly evidence in the film to suggest that Aileen's murderous rage has accumulated over the course of her life, this dialogue positions the first murder scene as the primary psychological motivation for Aileen's violence. To use Maureen Turim's phrasing, the scene offers 'a single key' for Aileen's aggression and constructs the attack as a major turning point in her life (1989: 149).

By arranging Wuornos's life events in ways that explicate motivation, *Monster* provides the kind of extensive contextual information that popular cinema has persistently withheld in representations of women's violence. On one hand, it is relatively common for contemporary films to provide an explanation for a woman's violence: *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979) and *Ôdishon* (Takashi Miike, 1999) all reveal that the protagonists endured a traumatic childhood that precipitated their violent deeds. In contrast to these examples, however, the construction of Wuornos's personal history in *Monster* is of primary narrative importance. Indeed, the film recalls Lewis Herman's fastidious advice to screen writers:

> Care must be taken that every hole is plugged; that every loose string is tied together; that every entrance and exit is fully motivated . . .

> that no baffling question marks are left over at the end of the picture to detract from the audience's appreciation of it. (1974: 88)

In keeping with this sentiment, *Monster* ensures that all aspects of Aileen's behaviour are addressed and explained.

Moreover, *Monster* also completely opposes the figuration of the violent woman as an inscrutable, 'historyless' enigma. This representation occurs for two reasons: first, films reliant on mystery and suspense often begin by withholding a complete context for the violent woman's actions. Examples of this include *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941) and *The Book of Revelation* (Ana Kokkinos, 2006). Even when the violent woman's personal history is revealed in the narrative, the moment often takes the form of a terrifying dramatic revelation, revealing something unexpected. In *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992), for example, the moment when the heroine discovers that her possessive roommate, 'Hedra Carlson' (Jennifer Jason Leigh), is actually named Ellen Besch is a point of high tension in the film. A similar moment occurs in *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) when the detective protagonist, Nick Curran (Michael Douglas), discovers that his colleague and former lover, Beth, was once named Lisa Hoberman (for Nick, this relatively minor deception all but confirms that Beth is responsible for the murder that he is investigating). In both these cases, the discovery of the woman's false name indicates the superficiality of her identity, which she has employed to redact her past and occlude her true nature. In contrast to these examples, *Monster* uses plot and characterisation to remove any 'baffling question marks' about its protagonist's history or motivation for violence.

By reconstructing its protagonist's act of homicide in this way, *Monster* does not suggest that the violent woman is essentially, ontologically different to normative femininity. She, like other biographical protagonists, possesses a personal history, psychological motivations and a consistent personality shaped by her experience in the world. Unlike the violent female archetypes found in noir and thriller cinema, *Monster* meticulously constructs a unified history, context and action for its protagonist. Significantly, this use of supposedly 'staid' biographical strategies of form and plot is not exclusive to *Monster*; it surfaces in several other biographical films about aggressive and homicidal women. American independent film *I Shot Andy Warhol* begins as radical feminist Valerie Solanas (Lili Taylor) leaves Andy Warhol's studio after shooting the artist and his associate, art critic Mario Amaya, in

1968. Like *Monster*, the film then travels back in time to recount the circumstances of Solanas's abusive upbringing. The story of convicted murderers Christine and Léa Papin (Joely Richardson and Jodhi May) in *Sister My Sister* also contains an excursion into the past, detailing how the two sisters were emotionally damaged during their impoverished upbringing. *Heavenly Creatures*, also, flashes back in time to recount the circumstances leading up to Juliet and Pauline's violent act of murder. These films provide spectators with access to the protagonists' past; through their use of teases and suggestive plot arrangements, they also, like *Monster*, invite a mode of reading from the spectator that actively infers links between the events shown onscreen and the violence that occurs. In doing so, they thus position the past as the genesis of the women's behaviour.

Melodrama, maternity and sacrifice

So far in this chapter I have argued that the manner in which biographical films plot life events impacts upon their conception of the subject. This being the case, narrative causality in *Monster* operates to explain the violent woman's motivations and, in so doing, produces her as a socially formed individual. Film biography, however, is not an aesthetically discrete genre. Many biopics also adopt the formal strategies of other film genres as part of their explicatory project. As Anderson and Lupo explain, 'the biopic has contestable boundaries, as it shares borders with historical drama, docudrama and social issue drama; its subsets overlap with other genres to create gangster biopics, musical biopics, sports biopics, African-American biopics and so forth' (2002: 91–2). Musical biopics, for example, such as *De-Lovely* (Irwin Winkler, 2004) and *Evita* (Alan Parker, 1996) feature diegetic music; biographies about law-breakers or enforcers like *Ned Kelly* (Gregor Jordan, 2003) and *The Untouchables* (Brian De Palma, 1987) employ the iconography of the crime genre; even *Ed Wood* (Tim Burton, 1994), a light-hearted take on the life of filmmaker Edward D. Wood Jr, reproduces the same camp aesthetic as Wood's oeuvre.

In each of these films, the generic, narrative and stylistic characteristics correspond in some way to the subject, and the project, of the biographical film in question. Biography is a *creative* recounting of a life; as such, the aesthetics of particular genres speak to the 'biographical truth' of the subject, simultaneously producing the individual in terms of historical facts and, in many cases, inventively articulating a more subjective truth about the life in question (Bingham 2010: 7). By this

logic, for example, a film such as *De-Lovely* could hardly discover the truth of Cole Porter's life without extensively featuring the songs that earned him his fame; nor could Tim Burton's *Ed Wood* celebrate Wood's Z-grade film oeuvre without mimicking his style. Genres, in short, are part of a biography's expressive vocabulary.

Aside from biography, the most important operative mode in *Monster* is melodrama, which the film uses to augment the film's explanatory function and position the spectator into sympathetic allegiance with Aileen. Several critical definitions of melodrama are currently circulating in film discourse: Caroline Bainbridge describes it as a form that deals with 'the realm of emotion' (2007: 104), Christine Gledhill explains that it is primarily associated with female audiences (1987: 10), and Linda Williams argues that it is the default mode of almost *all* American popular film (1998: 42). Of these differing definitions, *Monster* most strongly conforms to the subgenre of maternal melodrama. Defined simply, maternal melodramas are films that depict a mother's relationship with her children (often a single child in particular). Examples from the genre's 'apotheosis' in the 1930s and 1940s include *Blonde Venus* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) and *To Each His Own* (Mitchell Leisen, 1946) (Doane 1987: 73). A key aspect of the maternal melodrama is that it tends to tell stories about a mother's sacrifice for the sake of her child; for instance, the titular heroine of Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* works slavishly to provide for her daughter at the expense of her own happiness and other personal relationships. Maternal sacrifice also often involves the mother giving up the child – King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* is a paradigmatic example of this. As a young woman, Stella (Barbara Stanwyck) dreams of escaping her working-class origins. She marries a wealthy man and has a daughter, Laurel (Anne Shirley), but the marriage fails and Stella proves unable to transcend her lower-class persona. Stella realises that her lowly status will become a hindrance to her daughter; as such, when Laurel comes of age, Stella feigns coldness towards her so that Laurel will choose to live with her wealthy father instead (and therefore have the opportunity to marry well). As such, *Stella Dallas* is a story about a woman who sacrifices her relationship with her daughter so that the younger woman might achieve social success.

Although a comparison between 1930s melodrama and a biography about a homicidal woman may seem unlikely, both Curtiz and Vidor's films have striking narrative and tonal parallels with *Monster*. Specifically, Jenkins's film utilises narrative tropes typical of the maternal melodrama – such as a love relationship characterised by

dependence, a self-abnegating heroine and highly emotive scenes of suffering – in ways that rationalise Aileen Wuornos's violence and invoke sympathetic responses in the spectator. Admittedly, highlighting similarities between *Monster* and maternal melodrama in this way somewhat desexualises the lesbian relationship between Aileen and her girlfriend, Selby. However, I make this comparison not because the film characterises Aileen and Selby's relationship as literally maternal; rather, such an analysis can illustrate how certain textual qualities and modes of addressing the spectator in *Monster* further produces Aileen Wuornos's personhood and delineates her femininity.

In keeping with the biographical imperative to explain the subject, melodrama in *Monster* provides a strong emotional rationalisation for Wuornos's violence. As she declares in the film's opening scene, Aileen's most urgent desire has always been to love and be loved in return; as she says in the voice-over, 'I was always secretly looking for who was going to discover me. Was it this guy? Or maybe this one?' To this effect, the narrative suggests that it is ultimately for love that Aileen becomes a serial killer. When Aileen first meets Selby at the beginning of the film, she is given the opportunity to realise her lifelong desire to achieve a loving relationship. Selby forms an emotional connection with Aileen very soon after they meet; however, her right arm is in a cast, making her entirely dependent on Aileen for material support. When the pair inevitably face financial hardship, Selby threatens to leave. She reverts to a childlike state in her anger, weeping and blaming Aileen for her predicament. Aileen responds to Selby's demands first by returning to prostitution and then, when she can no longer stand the vulnerability the job entails, by murdering and robbing her johns. Selby is pleased with the money from the robberies and her satisfaction justifies the risk for Aileen. In an affectionate scene between the two, Aileen jokingly promises to take Selby out to 'some real top-notch places in the Quays' and buy her a house on the beach.

Aileen's willingness to accommodate Selby's demands recalls the self-sacrificing heroines of the 1930s and 1940s maternal melodrama, particularly Michael Curtiz's paradigmatic *Mildred Pierce*, adapted from the 1941 novel by James M. Cain. The hard-working middle-class protagonist of Curtiz's film (Joan Crawford) is motivated in virtually all things by her desire to please her spoilt daughter, Veda (Ann Blyth); the young woman, however, is constantly dissatisfied, leading Mildred to more drastic measures to bind her daughter closer. As in this earlier maternal melodrama, *Monster* positions spectators to interpret Aileen's actions as engendered by a well-intentioned desire to indulge Selby. When Aileen

admits to killing the first john, she does not state the obvious fact that she has been violently raped and feared for her life. Instead, Aileen tells Selby that she did it so that she could see Selby again: 'I didn't want to die thinking that maybe, maybe you could have loved me.' As Anderson and Lupo explain, biographical films tend to focus on the subject's *raison d'être*, the personal, private motivations that led them to become their public persona (2008: 104). In keeping with maternal melodramas, it is Selby's love that constitutes Wuornos's *raison d'être* in *Monster*, as well as the reason for her continued violence.

The film's representation of Aileen's indulgence of her girlfriend also intersects with a culturally sanctioned model of maternal behaviour. In their study of 'experts' advice to women' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English observe that medical authorities in the 1930s and 1940s not only recommended that mothers be as accommodating of their children's needs as possible, but suggested that maternal instinct would naturally predispose women to treat their offspring in this way (1989: 216). Likewise, the maternal melodrama positions the woman's devotion to her child as evidence of her natural maternal goodness, albeit with some caveats. In Vidor's *Stella Dallas*, for example, the heroine's provision of nice clothes and parties for her daughter is presented as an example of good mothering; however, her greatest maternal act consists of permanently severing her relationship with her child. Moreover, *Mildred Pierce* actively cautions against overly close parenting. Mildred's willingness to provide for Veda is repeatedly described by characters in the film as both foolish and responsible for turning Veda into the vicious (and eventually murderous) woman she becomes. Hence, the maternal melodrama both approves of and punishes the mother's devotion to her child. Yet *Monster*, like *Mildred Pierce*, presents Aileen's innermost impulse as an ultimately laudable, albeit misguided, desire for closeness.

In addition to rationalising Wuornos's violence, the melodramatic impulse of *Monster* also invites the audience to experience a favourable emotional response to Aileen's situation. A key scene at the film's conclusion is a particularly emotive moment that further recalls the maternal heroine's self-denying love. After she is captured by police, Aileen takes a telephone call from Selby, whom she earlier sent home on a bus. Selby claims to be frightened because police have been questioning her parents; in her apparent panic, she both blames and pleads with Aileen: 'You're going to let me go down for something you did . . . I just want to live, Lee. I just want a normal happy life.' Aileen eventually realises that Selby's line of questioning is designed to trick her into confessing the murders over the telephone. Knowing this, Aileen confesses anyway. As

she does so, the close-up of Selby speaking into the phone handset dollies back to reveal the police taping the conversation behind her. In this moment, Aileen sacrifices her own dreams for a loving relationship so that Selby can realise her wish for a 'normal, happy life' instead.

According to Linda Williams, such melodramatic scenes of self-abnegation are common in American cinema – films such as *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993), *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) and *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982) all contain intensified, melodramatic spectacles of suffering. However, such scenes are also the particular hallmark of maternal melodrama and the final scene of Vidor's *Stella Dallas* is an especially well-known example that bears a resemblance to the conclusion of *Monster* (1998: 60–2). In the last moments of Vidor's film, Stella, having purposefully driven her daughter, Laurel, away years earlier, secretly witnesses the young woman's marriage to an upper-class young man through a window. Stella does not join the wedding party, choosing not to disturb the high-society event with her vulgar dress and manners. When the ceremony ends, Stella walks away, teary but triumphant in the knowledge that she has secured her daughter's class ascendancy at a crushing, but ultimately worthwhile, loss to herself. In both *Stella Dallas* and *Monster*, then, the protagonists' willingness to sacrifice their own happiness – even, in Aileen's case, her life – for the sake of their daughter-figure confirms their essential goodness and heroism. Such highly emotional scenes have attracted the ire of feminist scholars for valorising women's self-victimisation and suffering. However, Williams argues that such moments work to position a character as morally good and therefore secure the audience's allegiance. She writes:

> . . . the basic vernacular of American moving pictures consists of a story that generates sympathy for a hero who is also a victim that leads to a climax that permits the audience, and usually other characters, to recognize that character's moral value. (1998: 58)

This sacrifice often becomes the means of eliciting a reaction of pathos from the spectator; that is, the spectator's 'sympathy for a hero who is also a victim' (1998: 58). Although *Monster* makes it clear that Aileen is selflessly shouldering the blame for her girlfriend, the scene emotionally reinforces the spectator's realisation of this sacrifice.

Pathos in *Monster* is further intensified – and Aileen's goodness further demonstrated – by the way that the film suggests the incorrectness of Aileen's fate. Williams notes that pathos is intensified if the heroine is misperceived by other characters in the film – for example, if the heroine is maligned or scorned by others. In this situation, the spectator is

positioned into a state of 'privileged knowledge' about the heroine's true nature. Quoting from Christine Gledhill, Williams writes:

> if a melodramatic character appeals to our sympathy, it is because pathos involves us in assessing suffering in terms of our *privileged knowledge of its nature and causes*. Pathos is thus 'intensified by the misrecognition of a sympathetic protagonist because the audience has privileged knowledge of the "true" situation'. (1998: 49) (my emphasis)

This strategy works particularly well with *Monster*. During her life, the real Aileen Wuornos was an outspoken individual who regularly insisted that her violence was justified. In an interview with NBC's *Dateline* in 1992, for example, Wuornos insisted that she did not regret the homicides that she committed. She also delivered an uncompromising message to her victims' families, insisting that each of the murdered men had raped her and that she was the injured party: 'You owe me, not me owe you' (cited in Hart 1994: 143). Yet, in the final scenes of *Monster*, the spectator is made aware of Aileen's 'true' character. Immediately after the telephone conversation, the film cuts to a courtroom scene where the taped telephone conversation is replayed. An expression of sadness crosses Aileen's face, but she recovers in time to scream furiously at the judge as she is sentenced to death. The very last scene of the film reaffirms that Aileen's resolve to save Selby is so strong that she acts the part of an enraged woman to secure her own conviction. *Monster* therefore doubly intensifies its pathos because it suggests that everyone except for the spectator misrecognises Aileen as monstrous and violent.

By couching Aileen's story within a maternal-type narrative, *Monster* secures Wuornos's characterisation as a morally good – although legally aberrant – character. In doing so, *Monster* strongly positions the spectator to respond emotionally to the narrative; specifically, to experience sympathy for a suffering heroine who is a victim of her johns, her girlfriend and of the courts. Through this process, the film fulfils the biographical imperative of revealing the link between a person's public deeds and his or her private experiences to the spectator, reimagining Aileen Wuornos's violence as an act motivated by love.

Melodrama, longing and idealised femininity

Although it has no immediate parallel in 1930s and 1940s maternal melodramas, *Monster* has another powerful emotional dimension that provides the spectator with privileged knowledge about its violent

protagonist. Specifically, the film's story and visual aesthetic focuses extensively on Aileen's unfulfilled longing to be beautiful, a detail that the narrative suggests is of significant biographical importance. In the opening montage, Aileen's first words express not only her desire to be loved but also a closely related wish to be attractive, happy and materially comfortable: 'I always wanted to be in the movies . . . Or maybe just beautiful. Beautiful and rich, like the women on TV.'[4] The exposition illustrates this desire by showing five-year-old Aileen play-acting as a grown woman in front of a mirror, wearing gold jewellery and what appears to be adult-sized clothing. In this montage, Aileen articulates a longing for an idealised feminine self, and this desire to be attractive is a strong and continuous theme throughout *Monster.* However, the film immediately establishes an unbridgeable distance between the adult Aileen and her childhood ideal. The scene following the exposition shows Aileen sitting beneath a highway bridge in the rain. A close-up of her face reveals that her hair is lank and soaking wet, her expression haggard and her skin freckled and grey. Indeed, the suggestively timed opening credits appearing immediately prior to the cut declare Aileen's failure to achieve her ideal in no uncertain terms, spelling out the film's title, 'Monster', as she sits under the bridge.

Monster maintains this focus on Aileen's unfulfilled desire to be beautiful by frequently alluding to the childhood fantasy shown in the exposition. Throughout the film, Aileen repeatedly engages in the act of assessing herself in the mirrors. After Aileen kills her first john, for example, she inspects her face in a public bathroom mirror to ensure that she has removed all traces of blood from her hair. Her face is wild and haggard, her expression shocked. This act of looking takes on the status of motif when it occurs again after the second murder. Before taking a shower, Aileen grimly inspects her naked body in a bathroom mirror, seeing that her torso is covered in the blood of her latest victim (Figure 5.1). In both instances, Aileen's looks vastly differ from the fantasy of glamour she invoked in the exposition – she is neither rich nor beautiful. These images dramatise, in a condensed form, what Jackie Stacey calls the sense of 'immutable difference' between Aileen and her ideal. In her analysis of female viewership, Stacey notes that respondents frequently articulate a desire to 'be like' a particular star, particularly in terms of attractiveness. Stacey observes that such idealisation of the female star involves several beliefs and desires, such as the notion that the star embodies 'ideals of feminine appearance', the assumption that beauty enables 'successful romantic conclusions' as well as personal qualities of 'confidence, sophistication and self-assurance', and, finally, the sense of 'immutable difference' between oneself and the star

(1994: 152, 154, 151). She writes, 'The distance between the spectator and her ideal produces a kind of longing which offers fantasies of transformed identities' (1994: 152). Melancholy and longing are a consequence of this kind of female identification.

Charlize Theron's casting in *Monster* also has a strong and informative role in this process, underscoring Aileen's failure to be 'like the women on TV'. Theron, who is both an actress and a former fashion model, underwent an extensive costuming and make-up process to disguise her glamorous looks and perform Wuornos's character convincingly. This transformation was widely remarked upon in the popular and specialist press.[5] Theron's persona as a normatively beautiful celebrity adds to the poignancy of Aileen's failure to achieve the feminine ideal. Theron's onscreen presence alongside (or, more accurately, underneath) the character that she represents emphasises Wuornos's lack of beauty and success. Just as Theron's 'true' identity is ever-present in the film, the femininity that Aileen craves is ever-present in her life; to use Foster Hirsch's words, Theron is always there, 'peering through [her] character's façade' (1991: 382). Richard Maltby terms this dual presence of star and character 'co-presence'; it is the phenomenon created when 'The audience experiences the presence of the performer as well as – in the same body as – the presence of the character' (2003: 248). Indeed, this effect of the co-presence of actor and character is amplified in *Monster* due to the film's status as a biography. Anderson and Lupo note that biopics often function as 'star vehicles' for performers (2002: 92). This

Figure 5.1 Aileen Wuornos inspects her appearance; *Monster* (2003)

is because actors must not only imitate the character well enough to satisfy an audience who are often already familiar with the real-life person: they must also convince onlookers that their performance has representational truth-value. In film critic Jim Schembri's words, an actor must 'leap over the obvious to get under the skin and into the soul of a character' (2012: n.p.). In addition, Theron and Aileen inhabit the same body onscreen, and as such, the implication is that Aileen may have a hidden or unrealised potential to achieve the beauty and success that she desires. In other words, Theron's casting suggests a lost opportunity – Aileen might have been 'beautiful and rich' were her life less deprived.

By dramatising Aileen's failure to transform into her ideal self, *Monster* positions viewers in terms of both pity for and identification with its protagonist's desire. For this reason, it is also possible to hypothesise, as is often remarked of melodrama, that *Monster* speaks to a specifically female audience. As Williams remarks, melodramas 'have reading positions structured into their texts that demands female reading competence' (1990: 143). As such, it is likely that *Monster* achieves heightened rhetorical power if the viewer has personally experienced a similar longing for an idealised feminine self. In a general sense, however, identification, emotional display and sacrifice play a key role in the film because they illustrate Aileen's character motivation. As I described in the preceding section, the biopic's dramatisation of character causation explains women's violence, rendering it intelligible within a sociological model of subjectivity. The film's meditation on Aileen's failed dreams of beauty and success also reveals Wuornos's innermost motivations to the spectator. *Monster* goes further, however, by associating these motivations with cultural mores of femininity: self-sacrifice, the desire for femininity, and longing. This process involves suggesting that Aileen's desires are not unusual or transgressive – she possesses the same encultured wish to be beautiful as the hypothetical female viewer of the film might also possess. The suggestion in *Monster* is that *all* women wish for idealised femininity and attractiveness, even those who commit transgressive acts of homicide.

Conclusion

In the conclusion to his study of film biography, Bingham describes biopics as a hermeneutic form that solicits the spectator's curiosity about the individual. He writes: 'We watch biopics so as to plumb that mystery of humanness, the inability completely to know another person, and the absolute importance of knowing them and ourselves'

(2010: 378). In accord with Bingham's sentiments, *Monster* produces the violent woman's personhood for the spectator's education and pleasure. In keeping with classical modality, the film constructs Aileen Wuornos as a subject formed in and by a pre-existing social world. This manoeuvre allows the film to explain Wuornos's life by providing contextualising information via the mechanisms of classical narrative. While some film scholars have criticised the traditional biopic as aesthetically 'pedestrian' because of this conformity to the Hollywood mode (Bingham 2010: 11), the ability of *Monster* to creatively hypothesise subjectivity resides precisely in its form. The significance of this meticulous reconstruction of Wuornos's past – and the careful emplotment of her life experiences in relation to her violence – is clear when compared to the violent villainesses of other popular genres, particularly noir and thriller films. In such texts, homicidal women often have a shady past, act on sketchy motives and rarely exhibit (or even seem to possess) a discernible sense of purpose. Such blank, historyless women appear in noir classics like *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947) and *Gun Crazy* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1950), neo-noirs like *Basic Instinct* and modern thrillers such as *La Femme Nikita* (Luc Besson, 1990) and *Single White Female*. This chapter has also argued that melodramatic modality in *Monster* intersects with these biographical impetuses. *Monster* maps Wuornos's persona onto normative understandings of self-sacrificing femininity, positioning spectators to experience emotions of pathos and sympathetic identification. These strategies methodically delineate the aetiologies of female violence, counteracting the construction of violent women as enigmatic beings within the film discourse.

Although classical narrative structure in *Monster* is precisely what allows it to produce the violent woman's subjectivity, this form also limits the film's capacity to imagine more subversive feminine ontologies. *Monster* does not strongly challenge normative notions of gender or, indeed, of subjectivity itself. If, as Hilary Neroni puts it, violent women overturn 'the ideological structures (most especially those involving gender) that regulate our experiences', the investigation of personhood in *Monster* proceeds in ways that resituate the violent woman within widely known and accepted ideas of psychological motivation (2005: x). Moreover, by drawing on melodramatic feelings as justification for Wuornos's actions, *Monster* softens its critique of the social and cultural structures that contributed to her violence. Emphasising love instead of poverty or misogyny, the film adopts a safe political stance; although the real Aileen Wuornos showed great awareness of the systemic and sexist injustice she experienced, Jenkins's film excludes her real-life

testimony in favour of representing Wuornos as a self-abnegating melodramatic heroine who mostly just wants to be loved (Morrissey 2003: 38). *Monster* is therefore an ameliorative film that reinstates Wuornos into, rather than resists, cultural norms of femininity.

This outcome is largely a consequence of the limitations of the biopic genericity particular to *Monster*. In spite of the mode's alleged low repute and aesthetic staidness, the classical biopic mode can command respectability as a high-minded genre. When Schembri insists that a biopic must reveal 'the soul' of the character, his review exhibits a similar set of anticipations as those associated with the art cinema's ability to reveal the subject. Textually, *Monster* directly engages with this expectation of it as a biopic, investigating issues that speak to the heart of human experience: viotnce, poverty and personal longing. However, the film undertakes this process within the constraint of popular storytelling traditions and the formal structures of biography. In other words, its exploration of violent female subjectivity is both enabled and constrained by its style.

Consequently, *Monster* is best described as a film that expands the boundaries of the biopic in terms of content rather than style. It incorporates a transgressive life into cinema and suggests that, while violent women are not typical biopic subjects, there is little reason why their lives should not be documented in this way. Moreover, *Monster* shows how the maternal melodrama, a particularly denigrated cultural form, can be adapted to fulfil the epistemophilic aims of biopics. Whereas the hagiographic biopic has historically been interested in men's public accomplishments rather than privately lived female experience (Bingham 2010: 216–17), *Monster* takes the very genre that is interested in women's domestic lives and uses it to rationalise Aileen Wuornos's public persona. Most importantly, *Monster* demonstrates how contemporary cinema traditions might be adapted to account for the violent female subject and to oppose her representation as an enigma.

6
Evincing the Interior: Violent Femininity in *The Reader*

This book has examined several different themes concerning the violent woman in contemporary film: hysteria in *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009), female monstrosity in *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis, 2001), sexuality in *Baise-moi* (Coralie Thinh Thi and Virginie Despentes, 2000), same-sex desire in *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994) and the biographical woman in *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003). This final chapter attends to the question of women's agency and culpability in *The Reader* (Stephen Daldry, 2008), a character-driven drama that concerns the actions of a former *Schutzstaffel* guard named Hanna Schmitz (Kate Winslet). Distributed by major independent studio The Weinstein Company, the film is an adaptation of Bernhard Schlink's bestselling novel about a German man, Michael Berg (played in the film by David Kross and Ralph Fiennes), who struggles with the realisation that his former lover participated in atrocities committed during the Third Reich.

The Reader occupies a complex position of distinction in contemporary film taste-economies. As an adaptation of a literary work, *The Reader* possesses a special status or credibility that was reflected in the film's marketing and critical reception. At the time of the film's release, Schlink's original novel was an international bestseller: it had been translated into forty-two languages and was the first German book to be listed in first place on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The film version mirrored this commercial success, grossing almost US$109 million internationally – it is therefore by far the most profitable of the films considered in this book. In addition, the circulation and marketing of *The Reader* set the film apart from mainstream Hollywood entertainment. In the United States, the film's distributors, The Weinstein Company, organised a pre-release preview with the Accompanied

Literary Society (ALS), an 'invitation-only group of New York celebrities, literati, and cultural industries scene-makers' in order to generate cultural legitimacy for the film (Murray 2012b: 135). *The Reader* then premiered in limited release in New York City and, following its success during awards season, expanded to over a thousand theatres nationwide.[1] The Weinstein Company's release strategy therefore participated in what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'the symbolic production of the work, i.e. the production of the value of the work', positioning *The Reader* as adjacent to the domain of art culture (1993: 37). *The Reader* was also critically lauded by major film awards bodies in Western Europe and North America; lead actress Kate Winslet won several high-profile awards for her role in the film, including a British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Award, a Golden Globe and an Academy Award for Best Actress. Film reviewers for the major urban media outlets repeatedly singled out Winslet's performance for special appreciation, thus positioning her acting ability as an indicator of the film's quality.[2]

The framing of *The Reader* as an artful text is also enabled by the film's themes: it is a character-focused drama that meditates on humanity's capacity for atrocity. By employing this overt tone of enquiry, the film cultivates a tone of gravitas and thus differs significantly from the low-budget, hyper-violent texts that usually centralise female Nazis. Women concentration camp guards sometimes appear in critically acclaimed dramas such as *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) and *Life Is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, 1997); however, they are most commonly found in the controversial 'Nazisploitation' genre. Key texts in the cycle include *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmonds, 1975) and its sequels (*Ilsa, Harem Keeper of the Oil Sheiks* [Don Edmonds, 1976]; *Ilsa, the Wicked Warden* [Jesús Franco, 1977]; and *Ilsa, the Tigress of Siberia* [Jean LaFleur, 1977]); sexploitation flick *Elsa Fräulein SS* (Mike Staar, 1977); hyper-violent *La Bestia in Calore* (Luigi Batzella, 1977); and the low-budget imitator of the Ilsa movies *Helga, She Wolf of Spilberg* (Alain Garnier, 1977). Such films foreground the spectacle of a sexually alluring female Nazi who victimises concentration camp prisoners, often in extremely sadistic ways. *The Reader*, in contrast, never shows Hanna's violence; her deeds not only take place offscreen, but approximately twenty years prior to the diegetic action. This being the case, the film's pleasures centre on enquiry into Hanna's culpability rather than the spectacle of female sadism.

This said, however, *The Reader* is not classifiable as an art film in the ways typically favoured by film scholars. Although Simone Murray argues that the film possesses an 'art-house mood' insofar

as it demonstrates ambiguity regarding Hanna's psychology (2012a: 180), in terms of narrative and thematic hallmarks, *The Reader* is better identified generically as a melodrama, a mode that has strong associations with popular culture. The film's generic tendencies manifest in two ways: first, in keeping with melodrama's characteristic interest in human relationships, the plot of *The Reader* focuses on the interpersonal consequences of violence rather than the occasion of murder itself. The film emphasises the emotional devastation that Hanna's actions cause her lover, Michael, such as his deeply felt guilt by association, his failed marriage and his inability to connect with his daughter. Second, *The Reader* performs the cultural work of melodrama insofar as it attempts to produce 'moral legibility' from the scenario of female violence it represents (Williams 1998: 59). The plot of the film is structured in ways that narratively scrutinise how Hanna arrived at her choice to commit Nazi atrocities and, indeed, whether this choice was made with full knowledge of its moral implications. Consequently, the narrative of *The Reader* can be productively compared to what Janet Staiger calls the 'fallen man' melodrama, a variety of film concerned with recounting the circumstances in which individuals become 'bad' or criminal (2008: 73). Like the fallen man melodrama, *The Reader* is concerned with exploring the extent of Hanna Schmitz's culpability, elevating her violence to the position of a problem to be solved in the narrative and stressing her individual capacity for good or evil action. Through plot-schemas focused on the explication of decision-making, agency and free will, melodrama operates as a heuristic form that explains Hanna's subjectivity for the spectator's pleasure and entertainment.

This final chapter examines how *The Reader* addresses Hanna Schmitz's participation in the Nazi genocide. Unlike the Nazisploitation genre, which typically posits the female SS guard as a deranged sadist, *The Reader* premises its representation of Hanna on a different rationale. Although she is brusque and mysterious, she bears no overt hallmarks of evil in a Manichean sense. Hanna's involvement in atrocities at Auschwitz therefore raises questions about the psychological conditions under which women become violent. The first section of this chapter thus investigates the melodramatic plot structures of *The Reader* and how they depict Hanna's moral agency, thus negotiating a cultural tendency to construct female violence as an unconscious impulse. Unlike my analysis in Chapter 5 – which considered the role of maternal pathos and suffering in *Monster* – this chapter examines melodrama's instrumentality as a mode that ratifies an individual's capacity to choose good or evil. Furthermore, instead of pursuing a

comparison between Hanna and the female sadist of Nazisploitation, I consider how Hanna's depiction responds more closely to that of the enigmatic *femme fatale*. In the chapter's second section, I examine the role of performance in the film's melodramatic exploration of violence. Kate Winslet's portrayal of Hanna Schmitz was critically lauded following the release of *The Reader*, operating as an indicator of the film's status. In addition, however, performance is also part of the armature of contemporary melodrama, communicating a character's interiority and struggle to choose moral action. Defining performance as 'what the performer does in addition to the actions/functions she or he performs in the plot' (Dyer 1979: 151), the second section of this chapter therefore investigates how performance signifies the violent woman's inner life as a means of exploring her agency.

Melodrama and moral choice

Daldry's adaptation of Schlink's novel is told from the perspective of Michael, a German man who suffers lifelong emotional trauma as a consequence of an affair with a former Auschwitz guard, Hanna. The story begins in 1995 as Michael, a middle-aged divorcee, is preparing breakfast for an attractive woman with whom he has an informal sexual relationship. As she dresses and prepares to depart, the woman wryly accuses Michael of being emotionally distant, a comment he deflects. The film then travels thirty-seven years into the past to 1958. In this timeline, Michael is fifteen years old and ill with scarlet fever. When he vomits in the courtyard of an apartment building, a woman in a tram conductor's outfit brusquely offers to walk him home. The pair soon begin an affair, with Hanna requesting that Michael read aloud to her prior to making love. He enthusiastically obliges. Some months later, Hanna disappears without explanation, leaving Michael distraught.

The story then moves forward to 1966 when Michael is a law student at university in Heidelberg. As part of an extracurricular assignment, he attends the trial of several former female guards who worked at the Auschwitz concentration camp. The women are accused of participating in the *Selektion*, the process by which the camp inmates were chosen for execution. The women are also accused of imprisoning Jewish women in a church following the evacuation of Auschwitz in 1945, leaving the victims locked inside even after the structure caught fire during an air raid. Hanna is amongst the accused. During the trial, however, Michael realises that Hanna is illiterate. This information explains why she asked Michael to read books aloud; it also indicates that Hanna is innocent

of authoring documents that covered-up the circumstances of the church fire (although it does not exonerate her from the crime itself). Hanna, however, does not admit to her illiteracy and is thus sentenced to twenty years in prison for having an organising role in the atrocity. Some years later, in a moment of reflectiveness, Michael creates a series of audio tapes and mails them to Hanna in prison, and she uses them to teach herself to read. Irrespective of this accomplishment – or perhaps because of it – Hanna hangs herself in her prison cell. Her last act is to bequeath a tin of money to an Auschwitz survivor whose testimony was instrumental in her conviction.

As this narrative synopsis indicates, *The Reader* is not solely interested in matters of gender and violence. The film addresses multiple issues: it examines 'ordinary' Germans' involvement in the Nazi genocide, explores the post-war generation's guilt by association with their elders, and shows the emotional toll that this inherited guilt takes upon Michael's personal life. The narrative implies that the shock of discovering Hanna's role at the Auschwitz concentration camp transforms Michael into a cold middle-aged man, and several scenes in this timeline indicate that he is emotionally estranged from his adult daughter ('I wasn't always open with you,' Michael confesses to her. 'I'm not open with anyone'). However, *The Reader* is also intensely focused on the reasons for Hanna's violent actions. It is concerned with investigating the conditions from which Hanna's violence arose and, most importantly, exploring the psychological mindset that allowed her to undertake these acts. This is evident not least in the way that Michael is deeply troubled by Hanna's actions. The young man spends much of his time at the Heidelberg law school reflecting on Hanna's culpability and, as evidenced by his secretive demeanour, the trauma of his discovery stays with him well into his middle age. Consequently, a key impetus of *The Reader* is its desire to know the violent woman; to understand her motivations and gauge the extent of her responsibility.

While this interest in Hanna associates *The Reader* with strains of cinema that look inwardly towards human subjectivity, the film's interest in confirming Hanna's agency occurs through its use of the melodramatic mode. According to Peter Brooks, melodrama's cultural work is to define and promote moral values following religious institutions' fall from power during the French Revolution (1976: 20). In the theatrical melodramas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such moral education occurred primarily through the use of Manichean character types who were construed as inherently good or evil. However, in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, melodrama began to

emphasise agency, characterising individuals as capable of *choosing* to be good or bad based on inner motivations and personality type (Staiger 1995: 79). As such, while contemporary melodrama remains interested in morality, its focus is on explicating the *psychological basis* of moral behaviour; Linda Williams describes this as 'the psychologization of character' (1998: 78). For Janet Staiger, such psychologisation is enacted through melodramatic plot structures that dramatise the individual's choice process. 'In melodrama,' Staiger writes, 'the narrative focus is not on explication of the crime but *resolution of the character's choice making*' (2008: 81) (my emphasis). Indeed, the emotional violence of some melodramas derives precisely from this dramatic treatment of characters' execution of choice in the narrative, wherein the plot of such films is mapped directly onto the protagonist's 'decision-making process' (1995: 84). The suspense, violence and emotional intensity of these films stem from a character's negotiation of 'good' or 'bad' decisions.[3] The hallmark of melodrama, therefore, is its insistence on, and dramatisation of, human agency and choice.

The Reader is considerably different in terms of tone and style to the 'blood melodramas' that Staiger discusses. This is chiefly because the plot does not pivot on Hanna's decision-making, hence, the film does not derive its dramatic tension from the unfolding of her violent deeds. The second act of the film, however, contains a lengthy sequence at a trial (reminiscent of the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials) in which Hanna is asked to recount her actions. The governing impetus of these dialogue-heavy courtroom scenes is melodramatic; they seek to determine whether Hanna freely chose to be violent. In these moments, Hanna's past acts of murder are retrospectively scrutinised, becoming a point of high drama in the film. First, the judge demands that Hanna account for her participation in the Nazi genocide, asking why she was willing to select prisoners for execution in the Auschwitz gas chambers. Hanna responds by insisting upon the logistical necessity of the task, stating that the old prisoners 'had to make room' for the new prisoners. When pressed by the judge as to whether she knew that the women were to be killed, she once again fails to acknowledge the moral dimension of her choice: 'Well, what would you have done?' She responds with similar reasoning when asked why, after having evacuated Auschwitz and marched the female inmates across the countryside, she locked them in a church and failed to release them after the roof caught fire. She replies that the prisoners would have escaped and that 'it would have been chaos'.

Although centred on verifying Hanna's agency, these courtroom scenes do not offer a complete explanation for her actions. On the

contrary, Hanna's responses portray her as reactionary, incapable of empathy and unable to act in ways that contravene her given role as camp guard. Her ability to 'recognize social rights from wrongs' – something that Staiger insists is important to establishing moral culpability in melodrama – therefore seems wholly deficient (2008: 72). In some respects, this aligns *The Reader* with a cultural tendency to depict women's violence as an unconscious behaviour. While some popular genres do frame the violent woman as the agent of narrative action (for instance, the violent heroine of action genres takes up the position of the 'figure in the landscape' [O'Day 2004: 203]) film narratives regularly disarm women's violence by creating an effect of impulsiveness. For example, according to Mary Ann Doane, the *femme fatale* of classic noir seems to possess little or no intention, wielding 'agency independently of consciousness' (1991: 2).[4] Although most *femmes fatales are* granted a motive for their actions (usually greed or some other form of personal gain) the overriding impression in the most paradigmatic American noir and thriller films – like *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947) and *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992) – is that she kills impulsively and without full awareness of the gravity of her actions.[5] The fatal woman is therefore likely a symptom of *fin de siècle* anxieties about, amongst other things, the power of the unconscious over the rational mind, as well as worries about mechanisation and the eroding boundaries between human subjects and artificial entities (the figure of the automaton, for instance, is an appropriate metaphor for agency that is independent of subjectivity) (Doane 1991: 2).

The question of whether Hanna is represented as having the capacity for moral decision-making in *The Reader* is therefore troubled. The film problematically suggests that, for most of her life, Hanna has not fully understood the extent of her cruelty or the inhumanity of the Holocaust. This would call her culpability into question and, indeed, the culpability of all who participated in the extermination of the Jews and other victims of the Third Reich. Ron Rosenbaum makes this precise criticism in an article for *Slate*, insisting that 'This is a film whose essential metaphorical thrust is to exculpate Nazi-era Germans from knowing complicity in the Final Solution' (2009: n.p.). *The Reader* demonstrably wants to avoid characterising Hanna as evil in an absolute sense, yet it also exhibits the melodramatic need to denounce the Holocaust, hold Hanna responsible for her actions and confirm that she chose to participate in the executions at Auschwitz of her own free will. It is, in large part, a 'frustrated' melodrama, and this impasse is for the

most part unresolved in the film. However, the conclusion of *The Reader* provides another opportunity for the text to test Hanna's agency when she is given the chance to atone.

Agency and atonement

In addition to retrospectively investigating Hanna's violent deeds, *The Reader* also tells the story of her moral development, with Hanna apparently endeavouring to right the injuries that her past actions inflicted upon others. Themes of atonement and reparation appear in turn-of-the-century 'fallen woman' melodramas, such as *The Lost Sheep* (Van Dyke Brooke, 1909) and Kinema-Color's adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (David Miles, 1913). Such films are usually concerned with a female protagonist who, having committed some sin of vice or licentiousness, can be potentially redeemed by demonstrating remorse and a willingness to mend her ways (Staiger 1995: 68). Unlike these early films, *The Reader* largely ignores the issue of Hanna's sexual morality (in spite of the fact that Michael is underage when they begin their affair). The film does, however, consider the possibility of Hanna's evolving moral capacity, a narrative feature that distinguishes *The Reader* from Nazisploitation films such as *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* or *La Bestia in Calore* in which the villainess escapes or dies without remorse. The story of *The Reader* continues long after Hanna is imprisoned for her role at Auschwitz, and the dramatic action in this third act consists of plot events that suggest Hanna's agency via acts of self-betterment.

In the final act of *The Reader*, Hanna's most decisive action occurs when she overcomes her illiteracy with Michael's help, a process that, the film implies, allows Hanna to achieve a greater moral understanding of her actions, as well as a capacity for self-reflection. This sequence is initiated when Michael, in his middle age, decides to make a series of audio tapes for Hanna, beginning with Homer's *Odyssey*. After receiving several different recordings in the mail, Hanna one day decides to borrow Anton Chekhov's 1899 novella *The Lady with the Dog* (known as 'The Lady with the Little Dog' in the film) with the intention of teaching herself to read. This scene is choreographed in a way that marks it out as a moment of key narrative tension and importance. In the quiet of her prison cell, Hanna loads the tape and plays the audio of Michael reading out the title of the book. She then stops the tape and, with sudden nervous energy, upends the contents of a small tin on her desk and grasps an old pencil stub. With clear trepidation, she then circles all the

instances of the word 'the' that appear on the first page of Chekhov's book (Figure 6.1). Shortly after this scene, Michael receives a short letter in inexperienced handwriting from Hanna thanking him for the recordings. In one respect, the purpose of this moment is to stage the uneasy reunion between the two protagonists and demonstrate Michael's still-unresolved feelings about Hanna (he is decidedly shocked at receiving the letter and does not write a reply). However, paired with the scene in Hanna's cell, the moment dramatises Hanna's awakening from what the film characterises as her profound passivity: she goes from listener to reader, passive recipient to one who expresses herself via the written word. It is important to point out here that Hanna's participation in Nazi atrocities can certainly be considered 'active' rather than 'passive'. Her decision to keep the female concentration camp prisoners locked in the burning church on the march from Auschwitz is an affirmative choice rather than merely a 'failure to act', as was her participation in the *Selektion*. Yet, in the context of *The Reader* and the scene inside the prison in particular, Hanna's struggle for literacy is emphasised as the greatest single undertaking of her life. It is her most autonomous deed in the story, made under no outside duress or suggestion, and is accomplished with great deliberation, drama and struggle.

Whether Hanna's new-found agency inspires remorse remains somewhat ambiguous in the film; when Michael demands that Hanna acknowledge the error of her actions, she cryptically says: 'I have learned to read.' On one hand, Hanna's suicide suggests that she eventually

Figure 6.1 Hanna Schmitz teaches herself to read; *The Reader* (2008)

realises that her actions at Auschwitz were morally wrong and acts from a wish to atone. On the other hand, this reading is promoted much more strongly in Bernhard Schlink's original novel than it is in the film. In the original text, Michael discovers that Hanna has used her new-found literacy to read scholarly reports and autobiographical accounts of the concentration camps. As the prison warden tells Michael, '"As soon as Frau Schmitz learned to read, she began to read about the concentration camps"' (2008: 205). This allows the novel to offer a metaphorical explanation for the complicity of ordinary Germans in the Holocaust – namely, that they were 'morally illiterate', or that they saw but could not truly comprehend the nature of the Nazis' actions. The connection between moral and literal illiteracy is not so fully realised in the film. Hanna is never shown reading anything other than fiction, and her cryptic response to Michael's questions means that she maintains a degree of unknowability in her death.

This being the case, *The Reader* therefore does not entirely challenge the construction of the violent woman as a passive entity who possesses 'agency independently of consciousness' (Doane 1991: 2). Like the classic *femme fatale*, Hanna's point of view is largely hidden, a narrative strategy that can give her actions an aura of thoughtlessness. Such passivity can be seen in earlier *femme fatales*; for instance, in Kathie Moffat's calm countenance in *Out of the Past*, Emily Taylor's fatal attack on her husband during a feigned bout of sleepwalking in *Side Effects*, or Alex Forrest's pursuit of her lover in *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987). While the absence of Hanna's point of view is reminiscent of these earlier constructions, *The Reader* is committed to a different, more meticulous representation that insists on Hanna's interiority even as it obfuscates this aspect of her personhood. It also moves away from caricatures of evil sadism seen in Nazisploitation through recourse to a contemporary psychological model of the self. *The Reader* therefore attempts to account for the reasons behind a woman's violence.

Although *The Reader* is intensely concerned with questions of the protagonist's agency and, by association, her interiority, there are some caveats to be made regarding Hanna's depiction in relation to the historical events during the Third Reich. On one hand, *The Reader* insists that Hanna be found culpable for her role at Auschwitz and that the Final Solution be characterised as abhorrent in no uncertain terms. To do otherwise would be to open the film up to accusations of moral relativism about the Holocaust. At the same time, however, *The Reader* avoids characterising Hanna as inherently evil. The only way that *The Reader* can assume this somewhat contradictory position is by

suggesting that Hanna was hindered by some sort of diminished capacity and only achieves 'proper' moral capacity once she learns to read and enlightens herself as to the true nature of her actions. Critics have pointed out that this is an unsatisfactory explanation for the historical fact of German participation in the Nazi genocide. Rosenbaum insists that citizens would have had to be 'deaf, dumb, and blind, not merely illiterate' to misunderstand what the Nazis intended with their Final Solution (2009: n.p.). Peter Bradshaw is also troubled by the film's treatment of its illiterate former Nazi: 'The dramatic and emotional structure of the film insidiously invites us to see Hanna's secret misery as a species of victimhood' (2009: n.p.). In making an argument for Hanna's compromised moral responsibility, *The Reader* therefore also has difficulty confirming whether she is a subject who possesses free will or an unconscious being who acts without sovereignty. Given that Hanna dies without explaining what she has 'learned', this issue remains unresolved. *The Reader* is therefore best characterised as a film that in principle rejects earlier depictions of the female killer as a passive entity but is ultimately unwilling to explicate the Nazi mindset.

Gesturing towards the interior

Plot in *The Reader* is an important mechanism in the film's exploration of Hanna's behaviour; however, performance also has a dense and complex significance in the film's negotiation of female violence. Numerous urban newspaper and magazine reviewers at the time of the film's release were impressed with Kate Winslet's depiction of Hanna Schmitz, with several critics claiming that the actress gave a strong impression of the character's psychology.[6] As David Jays remarks of Winslet's Hanna, 'she's always painstakingly cleaning and scrubbing, as if troubled by a stained conscience' (2009: n.p.); similarly, Todd McCarthy argues that Winslet 'provides a haunting shell to this internally decimated woman' (2008: 30). According to these reviewers, Winslet's performance captured the subtleties, richness and nuance of actual human personality, generating a convincing impression of selfhood and cognizance onscreen. Star performances like Winslet's have an important commercial function; Academy Award nominations are central to The Weinstein Company's promotional strategy of marketing quality adaptations to niche audiences worldwide (Murray 2012b: 133). However, performance in *The Reader* is also instrumental to the film's depiction of Hanna's subjectivity and its exploration of her violence. As James Naremore argues, performance is central to creating '"the illusion

of the unified self"' (1988: 5), whereas Richard Maltby states that acting creates 'an *effect* of the human in the cinematic machine' (2003: 248) (original emphasis). Performance in *The Reader* thus produces an impression of the violent woman's interiority, a process that supports its depiction of Hanna's agency.

Melodramatic performance styles have a heritage in traditions not usually known for their capacity to convey the intricacies of human nature: these include pantomime, acrobatics and circus. Nevertheless, psychologically expressive acting techniques are a dominant aesthetic in contemporary film melodrama. As Williams observes, in the twentieth century:

> popular psychology and method acting became the reigning form of the assertion of personality. At this point the eruption of symptoms and unconscious gestures began to substitute for the more straightforward bodily expression of good and evil. (Williams 1998: 79–80)

Staiger makes a similar point, insisting that theological perspectives on human behaviour, 'some social science theory' and the increasing popularity of realism at the turn of the century helped change melodrama's histrionic, Manichaean-influenced performance style to one premised on principles of psychological motivation (1995: 79–80). Moreover, contemporary melodramas such as *The Reader* circulate within a cultural context that is characterised by a converging set of ideas and discourses – or what philosopher Charles Taylor calls a 'family of senses' – that imagine the self as 'inner' (1989: 111). Although not articulated in the same way at all times, this general idea has persisted for some time in Western thought; Taylor traces its origins to the dualist philosophies of Plato and Augustine (1989: 115, 127). These discourses identify the locale of self as *inside* – in the mind – rather than in or on the body. Performance that indicates the presence of the mind is therefore integral to melodrama's contemporary cultural work of attributing good and evil to individuals' psychology rather than an external or inherent force.

In keeping with this imperative, *The Reader* employs a performance style that constructs an impression of Hanna's conscious mind. The film achieves this largely through Winslet's acting techniques. The actress's physicality is decidedly closed: she adopts a curt manner of speech and employs a stiff gait, stamping heavily up the stairs of Hanna's apartment block in the first act of the film (Figure 6.2). When Hanna and Michael first meet by accident, she takes almost no notice of the young man as he crouches, ill with scarlet fever, in the courtyard of her apartment

building. She stops only to wash away Michael's vomit and offers to walk him home merely as an afterthought. Taken as a whole, Winslet's performance is made up of a collection of gestures that convey a grimness and austerity that pervade Hanna's being. Such restraint is almost always absent from other characters Winslet has played; indeed, what is perhaps most effective at highlighting Winslet's performance in *The Reader* is the way in which she plays against her usual type. Winslet frequently portrays women coded as 'free spirits', such as the rebellious Rose DeWitt Bukater in *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), unruly cult-follower Ruth Barron in *Holy Smoke!* (Jane Campion, 1999) and excitable Clementine Kruczynski in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004). In *The Reader*, however, her physical performance noticeably subdues any sense of such lively nonconformity. Her knitted brows, tight chignon and pursed lips restrain her body in ways that signify repression, and her hair is pinned even during the sex scenes.

These gestural aspects of Winslet's performance are what Roberta E. Pearson calls 'byplay': 'the little details, the realistic touches' and mannerisms adopted by actors that do not necessarily advance the narrative action (1992: 33). Julia Hallam describes byplay as an acting technique that is used to increase verisimilitude but has an additional, related purpose of gesturing towards withheld emotions that motivate the character's actions (2000: 85). This acting technique is important to film melodrama; for example, Williams observes the importance of byplay to *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956), writing that

Figure 6.2 Kate Winslet adopts a stern physicality as Hanna; *The Reader* (2008)

'Robert Stack's swallowed voice, squeezed frame, and hunched way of holding a martini was typical of a whole generation of Oedipally beset protagonists' (1998: 80). During this era, Williams states it was the 'eruption of symptoms and unconscious gestures' in performance that indicated the morality of a character rather than a gestural acting style (1998: 79). In *The Reader*, Winslet's stiffness and curt manner operate to signify Hanna's psychology and interior. Somewhat paradoxically, the effect of repression created via performance indicates her profundity as a violent woman. This impression of 'depth-via-obstruction' is eloquently expressed, albeit within a slightly different context, by Mary Ann Doane in her discussion of the *femme fatale*. According to Doane, obfuscation, particularly visual occlusion, can create a sense of deepness. If meaning is not immediately available to the onlooker – when it is frustrated or hindered in some way – the suggestion is that there must be *more* meaning to be gleaned than is immediately apparent. Doane considers the veil a good metaphor for this tendency to ascribe profundity to mystery; the veil adds complexity and 'makes truth profound' (1991: 54). To apply this idea to performance in *The Reader*, then, the withholding involved in Winslet's restrained byplay gives the impression of Hanna's mind. It allows Winslet's performance to 'evade the superficial, to complicate the surface by disallowing self-sufficiency' and therefore announce the presence of Hanna's unsaid and repressed thoughts (1991: 55).

Representing Hanna's interiority in this way maps her subjectivity onto a dominant notion of personhood as defined by its inwardness. It also counters the way that women in the classical cinema have been portrayed as *without* depth or interiority as a means of producing their monstrosity. Classic narrative cinema is frequently given over to the representation of the male protagonist's subjectivity, against whom the film represents the violent woman or *femme fatale* in ways that construct an effect of her *lack* of interiority; for example, Doane refers to the idea of the hieroglyphic in order to observe the way in which women in cinema are represented; like the ancient form of writing, she at once 'harbours a mystery' and is a pure image, self-sufficient, and 'iconic', without depth or inwardness (1991: 18). This converges with the idea of the *femme fatale* as a passive entity and an Other whose subjectivity is elided from the text. Through its aesthetic of interiority, performance in *The Reader* thus allows for the precise opposite reading of its violent female protagonist, positing Hanna as a psychologically nuanced individual.

Impressions created by performance can, admittedly, be both fleeting and subjective. To begin with, the meaning of performance is difficult to determine with precision because actorly gestures are intermeshing and non-discrete. As Pearson writes, the 'continuous flow of signifiers [in performance], along with the lack of a minimal unit, makes it extremely difficult for the analyst to segment gestural signification' (1992: 25). The effects of acting are also highly contingent on the audience's individual perception and comprehension of acting codes. This is well demonstrated in David Edelstein's negative review of *The Reader*. Recounting an early scene between Hanna and Michael, Edelstein expresses amusement at Winslet's faux German accent: '[I]n the course of peeling off her stockings, she gives him a hard stare and asks, "Haff you always been *weak*?" Nazi ideals die hard' (2008: n.p.). Such comments demonstrate that the effect of an actor's performance is largely a consequence of interpretation. Nevertheless, Edelstein's words reveal that he nonetheless reads Winslet's performance according to the principles of psychological realism; his suggestion that Hanna harbours a fascist disdain for weakness is premised on his perception of her inner motivations. Performance in *The Reader* thus cues the spectator to look for evidence of Hanna's interior, creating the effect of her mind. It invites onlookers to play the role of analyst; to scrutinise Hanna and plumb the inner workings that moved her to violence.

Kate Winslet and stardom

The phenomenon of performance in *The Reader* is also closely connected to the issue of casting. As Naremore remarks, the viewer's 'interest in players as "real persons"' has an important role in how meaning is made in cinema (1988: 2). The leading actress's identity has been a point of interest in several of the films this book examines – for instance, Raffaëla Anderson and Karen Bach's real-life careers as pornographic actresses are frequently mentioned in literature exploring the 'authentic' hard-core credentials of *Baise-moi* (Best and Crowley 2007: 165; MacKenzie 2002: 317). Moreover, as I discuss in the preceding chapter, Charlize Theron's acclaimed impersonation of Aileen Wuornos intensifies the emotional tone of loss and sadness in *Monster*. Kate Winslet's star persona also informs her depiction of the violent woman in *The Reader*. The actress possessed a significant degree of fame in anglophonic nations when the film was released theatrically in late 2008. Although Winslet secured international celebrity following her role in the blockbuster *Titanic*, she also established a reputation as an accomplished actress through a series

of critically acclaimed roles in dramas such as *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994), *Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee, 1995) and *Quills* (Philip Kaufman, 2000). Winslet has been repeatedly recognised for her acting skill by prestigious European and North American industry bodies, having been awarded London Film Critics' Circle, BAFTA and Screen Actors Guild Awards for her earlier performances.[7] Indeed, the 2009 awards season saw Winslet's career reach a new peak; both *The Reader* and the critically acclaimed drama *Revolutionary Road* (Sam Mendes, 2008) were expected to secure nominations for industry awards in both Europe and North America, thus creating a situation in which Winslet could potentially be nominated twice in the same category. Although this did not occur for the major North American ceremonies, Winslet did secure prizes for her performances in both films: a Golden Globe Award for Best Actress in a Motion Picture Drama for *Revolutionary Road*, an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Motion Picture for *The Reader*, and the London Film Critics Circle Award for Actress of the Year for both films combined.

The accumulated influence of these industry accolades is that Winslet's persona is premised largely on her acting ability rather than simply her personal life or glamorous brand identity. Certainly, Winslet's personal life does attract considerable tabloid interest, particularly the issue of her physique, her marriages and the parentage of her three children.[8] Winslet has also cultivated an air of sophisticated glamour by acting as a spokesperson for luxury brands, including American Express, cosmetics company Lancôme and Swiss watchmaker Longines. Nevertheless, the actress consistently wins plaudits for her talent, and Winslet's Academy Award in 2008 for *The Reader*, her Honorary César Award in 2012 and her appointment as CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) in the same year have firmly cast her stardom as both respectable and well founded in professional ability. Winslet therefore occupies the terrain between glamorous celebrity and artistic integrity. She is both a performer 'associated with *quality* material' *and* a star whose personal brand carries global currency (Negra 2005: 74) (original emphasis). Winslet's particular mode of celebrity could therefore be described as that of an 'accomplished' star.

Winslet's casting does not signify Hanna's subjectivity in and of itself. Rather, her reputation as a skilled actress creates modes of viewership and expectation, generating a presumption of interiority in performance and establishing conditions of interpretation in relation to the troublesome, violent female character that Winslet portrays. Kenneth Turan's review of *The Reader*, for example, equates Winslet's performance with

psychological realism, writing that 'she allows conflicted emotions to play across her face as she struggles with the life and death decision of which secrets to reveal and which to hide away' (2008: n.p.). Galvin's review declares that 'If there is something strong and essential and deep about *The Reader*, it lies with Kate Winslet . . . her sense of being (as opposed to acting) is staggering' (2009: n.p.). For these reviewers, it is the presence of the actress, informed by her personal stardom as a performer skilled in psychological realism, that signifies interiority. Richard Maltby proposes a useful way of understanding this mode of viewing performance. Acting, he argues, can function as a 'separate spectacle' that attracts the notice and appreciation of the spectator *as acting* (2003: 247). As Pearson puts it, audiences can derive pleasure 'not from participating in an illusion but from witnessing a virtuoso performance' (1992: 21). These authors refer principally to a reflexively theatrical mode of performance that directly addresses the audience, such as dance or pantomime; however, as Turan's review demonstrates, viewers can still paradoxically read performance as a separate spectacle even when acting aspires to elide the evidence of its own artifice.

Enabled by a contextual and intertextual awareness of Winslet's star persona, appreciation of the separate spectacle of performance in *The Reader* is premised on Winslet's quality stardom and assumed ability to add subtext and psychological nuance to her performance, an expectation that produces a hermeneutic mode of spectatorship where reviewers read the violent woman's thoughts and secrets. In other words, Winslet's casting engages a mode of relation to performance that makes psychological depth apparent to the spectator. This is supported by the text itself – for instance, the relatively sparse plot of *The Reader* focuses attention onto Hanna's character. Violent spectacle is completely absent from the film, which therefore achieves its tension, emotion and narrative meaning through lengthy scenes of dialogue. As a 'drama' rather than an 'action' film, *The Reader* positions the actors' delivery as a key object of spectator's scrutiny.

Like the film's melodramatic narrative structure, the interiority of Winslet's performance corresponds with a prevailing dualistic idea about subjectivity as constituted by inwardness – namely thoughts, the psyche or simply 'the mind'. Although theories of personhood in Western thought are by no means universally held or culturally consistent, according to Taylor:

> Our modern notion of self is related to, and one might say constituted by, a certain sense (or perhaps a family of senses) of inwardness

> . . . we think of the depths of the unsaid, the unsayable, the powerful inchoate feelings and affinities and fears which dispute with us the control of our lives, as inner. (1989: 111)

It is possible to find numerous expressions of such a 'sense' in the history of Western thought; for example, René Descartes's paradigmatic *cogito* dictum directly equates the inner process of thought with subjectivity (rather than, say, embodied existence) (cited in Mansfield 2000: 14–15). In a contemporary context, Nikolas Rose attributes this sense of inwardness to the dominance of psychological, psychoanalytic and psychiatric discourses since the late nineteenth century; such disciplines constitute 'the contemporary apparatus for "being human"' in present-day Western society 'as *individuals inhabited by an inner psychology*' (1996: 2, 3) (my emphasis). Hence, although it is conceptualised in various ways by numerous discourses, the interior – comprised of thoughts, emotions, memories, motivations, 'the psyche' – is frequently considered the seat of subjectivity in contemporary Western culture.

The separate spectacle of Winslet's performance in *The Reader* gestures towards this inner domain; however, the film never fully uncovers the thoughts and secrets inside Hanna. Winslet's personification of the taciturn SS guard only indicates the *presence* of an interior and does not reveal all of her motivations. This mirrors the film's ambiguity concerning Hanna's participation in the Final Solution; although the film's conclusion suggests that Hanna feels remorse for her part in the Nazi genocide, *The Reader* maintains a degree of uncertainty about this supposition. When Michael asks Hanna if she ever thinks about the past, she refuses to answer, insisting that it 'doesn't matter' and that 'the dead are still dead'. In spite of this ambiguity, however, what is notable is the way that Winslet's performance bestows a subtext, consciousness and a sense of a unified selfhood upon the violent woman – even if the contents of this self remain shadowy. Her casting therefore opposes the effect of evacuated consciousness that characterises many filmic representations of female violence.

Conclusion

The Reader is a melodrama that meditates upon the violent woman's interiority and her moral agency; as a film, however, it is caught between two impulses. With her taciturn manner and uncertain motivations, Hanna Schmitz recalls the well-established figure of the feminine enigma. Although *The Reader* shares some commonalities with the

Nazisploitation genre in its interest in a sexually assertive female SS guard, the film responds far more closely to the idea of the *femme fatale* who is a stranger to her lover. As Murray observes, the plotline of *The Reader* meditates on the 'essentially unknowable nature of the beloved' (2012b: 130). Represented in this way, Hanna's personhood becomes the film's metaphor for the mystery of 'ordinary' Germans' complicity in the Nazi genocide. Put another way, the narrative equates feminine unknowability with the unfathomableness of the Holocaust. At the same time, however, *The Reader* insists that Hanna is – indeed, that she *must* be – an individual with a fully realised psychological life. As a melodrama, *The Reader* attempts to produce its characters' moral agency through narration and performance. The film's impetus to explain immoral behaviour with recourse to contemporary psychological theory demands that Hanna be represented as a subject who possesses cognizance and free will. To pose any other representation would imply that the Holocaust was committed by individuals who are somehow Other to ordinary human beings; that they are not psychologically motivated or that they lack sovereignty over their actions. Clearly, this is not a position that *The Reader* adopts. As such, it is a film that signifies that Hanna indeed possesses inner psychology but ultimately withholds the details of her mind from the spectator.

This cautious representation of violent femininity is reflective of the status of *The Reader* as an 'arthouse/mainstream quality indie crossover'; that is to say, as a film that purports to offer intellectual pleasures but that also attempts to appeal to as broad an audience as possible (Murray 2012b: 133). On one hand, *The Reader* is as curious about the violent woman's transgressive personhood as any of the texts considered in this book. It adopts the same tone of enquiry found in *Antichrist*. Its plot is as focused on delineating Hanna's motivations as *Monster* and *Heavenly Creatures*. Its pleasures involve 'making contact' with a transgressive form of femininity, as seen in *Trouble Every Day* and *Baise-moi*. On the other hand, *The Reader* opts to map Hanna's subjectivity onto a dominant conception of subjectivity as psychologically constituted and motivated. Therefore, in contrast to texts considered earlier in this book, the film does not engage in a filmic conversation about subjectivity via formal or narrative experimentation. Unlike *Trouble Every Day*, for instance, *The Reader* does not erode the boundaries between self and Other via a sensuous viewing experience. It does not challenge the spectator's expectations and gaze in the manner of the multi-generic *Antichrist* or the reflexive *Baise-moi*. It also lacks the willingness of *Heavenly Creatures* to identify the spectator with the violent woman's

aggressive drives. It is undoubtedly risky (both ideologically and commercially) to align spectators with a concentration camp guard; to do so would be to position audiences to feel empathy for a woman who participated in genocide. A comparison with *Heavenly Creatures*, however, shows just how absent Hanna's perspective is from *The Reader*.

The difficulties of presenting Nazi subjectivity aside, what *The Reader* does demonstrate is that melodrama can answer the expectations of contemporary 'quality' cinema that I outlined in the Introduction to this book. It can also operate as a discursive tool that facilitates explorations of transgressive women's subjectivity. In keeping with descriptions of melodrama as a mode that responds to a culture's moral needs, *The Reader* attempts to account for women's violence during one of the most traumatic events in recent Western history – a task that requires both the moral certainty of melodrama and its responsiveness to prevailing notions of the human subject.

Conclusion

Although action heroines, exploitation vigilantes and *femmes fatales* have long appeared on cinema screens, filmic representations of violent women continue to intrigue journalists and commentators. At the time of writing this book, a new film franchise has become the focus of an animated discussion about violence and gender in cinema. Following the likes of *Kill Bill Vols 1 & 2* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003; 2004), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2000), *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000) and other action blockbusters featuring violent female protagonists, the massively successful film *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012) and its sequels are the latest in a long line of mainstream action texts to elicit commentary from observers. Like those who followed the 'action babe' cycle of 2000 and 2001, these critics are wondering what the new violent heroine, the creatively named Katniss Everdeen, indicates about women's cultural position in the social world. Paul Byrnes opines that *The Hunger Games* franchise aims to empower young girls 'by turning the violence back on men' (2013: n.p.); Suzanne Moore declares that Katniss is a feminist role model, 'shooting a flaming arrow across a cultural landscape barren of images of young, self-contained female strength' (2013: n.p.); whereas David Cox ponders whether contemporary action heroines are a symbol of gender equality or 'macho' male imitators (2013: n.p.).

Witnessing this media discussion unfold during this book's creation confirms two points. It firstly shows that the violent woman's significance to feminism and gender is still unresolved. What is striking about the discussion of the *Hunger Games* franchise is that critics are revisiting almost precisely the same talking points about the violent woman as a feminist 'role model' that arose during the 'action babe' cycle over a decade ago. Cox readily admits that 'women have been successfully

kicking butt for some time now' on cinema screens, but he then proceeds to rehash old debates by discussing the violent heroines of the past, including the eponymous *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) (2014: n.p.). Moreover, as this book has asserted, debates about women and violence in cinema are almost always initiated by, and centred upon, the female monsters, villainesses and heroines of popular film. *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009) proves an exception to this rule because it received some media attention for its murderous female protagonist – for example, Greta Hagen-Richardson argued that the film 'transferred to women the normal movie violence that has so long been exclusive to men' (2009: n.p.). The proliferation of opinion pieces surrounding Katniss Everdeen, however, confirms that it is the violent woman of popular film who has been the chief focus of media and scholarly discussion.

This book has called for a different focus. Rather than pursuing questions about female violence through an analysis of popular cinema, I have attended to the depiction of violent women in six critically distinguished films as a way of further discovering their pleasures and functions. I have surveyed the art-horror films *Antichrist* and *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis, 2001); the hyper-violent road movie *Baise-moi* (Coralie Trinh Thi and Virginie Despentes, 2000); the lesbian romance *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994); the biographical film *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003); and the period drama *The Reader* (Stephen Daldry, 2008). As I outlined in the Introduction to this book, I have chosen to focus on films that are positioned in counter-distinction to popular cinema. Rather than posing this cohort as a fixed genre, I have conceptualised them as a class of film that occupies a position of worth in contemporary film taste-hierarchies. In order to undertake an analysis of women's violence in this grouping, I investigated the narrative and aesthetic properties and the contexts of exhibition that affirm these six films' elevated status in urban, upper-middle-class film culture. This study proceeded from the canonised art film pedigree of *Antichrist* and *Trouble Every Day* to independent films that occupy a position of distinction as 'quality' dramas for 'discerning' audiences, such as *Monster* and *The Reader*.

Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema has argued that these films share a chief organising rationale: namely, a desire for knowledge of the violent woman, and a drive to represent this transgressive femininity. Several different theories exist regarding the violent woman's pleasures and functions: for instance, Rikke Schubart describes her as an empowerment-fantasy for female audiences (2007: 42); Mary Ann

Doane says she is a symptom of anxiety about feminism (1991: 2–3); Marc O'Day argues that she is a source of erotic spectacle as well as narrative agency (2004: 203). To these, I add that the violent woman also activates a desire for knowledge of her femininity: such desire is these films' operative impetus. Through the mechanisms of plot, form or the manipulation of viewing relations, the films in this book position the spectator to engage in a relationship of curiosity and investigation towards the violent woman. They ask *why* women inflict physical harm upon others: they are also interested in *who* the violent woman is as a gendered human being. *Monster*, for instance, is not only concerned with uncovering the reasons why Aileen Wuornos killed men on the Florida highways; the film also investigates what kind of woman she is, examining her capacity for love and self-sacrifice. Whilst *Baise-moi* is, in contrast, largely uninterested in delineating clear motives for the protagonists' violence, it nevertheless seeks to convey Nadine and Manu's experience of fun, displeasure and *ennui*. I have observed that the desire to know these women enmeshes with a broader epistemophilia centred on women who kill and harm others: as Doane reports, cultural narratives associate women 'with deception, secretiveness, a kind of anti-knowledge' (1991: 3). In its original context, Doane's statement describes how the formal structures of classical cinema produce femininity as an enigma, thus suppressing the specificity of women's subjectivity. I have argued that contemporary accounts of women's violence adhere to this rationale, constructing the violent woman as a mystery to be investigated.

By mobilising the enigma, the pleasure of the violent woman in these films therefore involves the 'thinking-through' of gender. To borrow Robert Sinnerbrink's account of cinema's philosophical power, films about homicidal women 'question given elements of our practices or normative frameworks, challenge established ways of seeing, and open up new paths for thinking' (2011: 141). Through a creative mobilisation of its kinetic style, for instance, *Heavenly Creatures* positions onlookers into affective and emotional identification with its protagonists' secret world of love, fantasy and angst. *Baise-moi* and *Trouble Every Day*, in contrast, challenge 'established ways of seeing' by upsetting the unidirectional mode of film viewership: *Baise-moi* accomplishes this through its capacity to 'look back' at spectators and therefore adopt an expressive voice, whereas the sensory style of *Trouble Every Day* dissolves the demarcations between the onlooker and the monstrous woman onscreen. This is not to suggest that valorised cultural forms such as art and independent cinema are the only groupings that use the filmic

medium to think through gender – quite the contrary. In her feminist application of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's ideas to cinema, for example, Teresa Rizzo argues that some popular films can be deeply philosophical. 'Certain films,' she writes, 'have a way of calling into question and destabilizing any fixed notion of identity and subjectivity both on screen and between the film and the viewer' (2012: 107). An example of this is the *Alien* franchise, which Rizzo argues enacts a philosophy of subjectivity that corresponds with Deleuze and Guattari's ideas of 'becoming', suggesting the ontological contingency and mutability of masculinity, femininity and alien otherness (2012: 107). Hilary Neroni makes a similar point in her analysis of violent women in popular cinema, observing that some films conceptualise gender as fluid rather than essential: 'the violent woman,' she writes, 'often reveals the contingent nature of the fantasy of femininity' (2005: 160). Showing female bodies engaging in 'masculine' behaviours constitutes a cinematic thought-experiment, an imaginative demonstration of gender's flexibility.

As such, the aim of this book is not to claim that art cinemas or other critically elevated cohorts are uniquely placed to explore the violent woman's ontology. Rather, an analysis of these films can show that engagement with the violent woman's 'difficult' subjectivity can be a viewing pleasure in itself. This is in part attributable to the way that certain film milieus mobilise curiosity, cultivating spectators to expect 'pleasure-in-knowledge' as part of their viewing experience. Critics repeatedly praise art and 'quality' films for their perspicacity in relation to human subjectivity, and the texts considered in this book are often assessed on the basis of such expectations. Critic Margaret Pomeranz, for instance, describes *Antichrist* as 'a bold, beautiful journey into the dark side of the soul' (2009: n.p.). Chuck Bowen's retrospective review of *Trouble Every Day* ascribes Claire Denis with special insight into human sexuality, arguing that the film 'expounds on the notion of sex-as-violence with an unnerving clarity' (2013: n.p.). Alix Sharkey says that *Baise-moi* co-director Virginie Despentes 'does not flinch from showing how women – almost willingly – allow themselves to be debased, bought, sold and maltreated' (2002: n.p.). Although topics such as 'sex-as-violence' and 'the dark side of the soul' may seem decidedly unenjoyable topics, these reviews suggest that the films' ability to communicate such themes about the violent woman's existence is, ultimately, pleasurable.

As I have maintained throughout this book, the case studies examined in *Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema* are united by a shared

organising drive – a common curiosity – rather than, for example, a shared stylistic or narrative strategy. These films do, however, tend to represent the violent woman's problematic personhood either through a manipulation of the spectators' gaze, through narrative discourse, or through a combination of both. *Antichrist*, *Trouble Every Day*, *Baise-moi* and *Heavenly Creatures*, for instance, all initiate modes of viewing that challenge the objectifying gaze inscribed by the cinema apparatus. *Antichrist* interrogates existing constructions of women's subjectivity in relation to a structuring and voyeuristic look, embodied onscreen by the overbearing character of the Man. The film critiques its audiences' curiosity by enacting generic frustration – a filmic bait-and-switch – by transforming from an art cinema meditation on grief to a horror film that attributes women's violence to their supernatural evil. By undertaking such a shift, the film exposes the spectator's desire for knowledge of the Woman as an invasive and controlling drive (a problematic critique in a film that contains intense spectacles of violence committed *against* the Woman, but a present critique nonetheless). *Baise-moi* also challenges the onlooker's voyeurism, albeit in a different way to *Antichrist*. The film draws on hard-core aesthetics to pose an authentic representation of the protagonists' experience. The film's use of maximum visibility also initiates an intersubjective mode of spectatorship. The formal organisation of the film 'looks back' at the spectator, therefore compromising his or her position as unseen voyeur. *Trouble Every Day*, in contrast, opts for a different strategy: although the film also deconstructs the ways that the monstrous woman has been inscribed in the film apparatus, the film's tactile, affective dimensions provoke a visceral horror reaction in the spectator that breaks down the boundaries between spectator and violent female Other established in the visual field. *Heavenly Creatures*, too, differs stylistically to these films, yet it similarly disrupts the onlooker's objectifying gaze. Through its kinetic style, this film identifies spectators affectively and emotionally with the killer lesbian protagonists: their thrilling experiences of love, their victimisation and their aggression. The film thus provides an intensely personal view of the lesbian protagonists' insular world.

These films also construct the violent woman via film narrative. Such manoeuvres are especially important in the films that adhere more closely to 'classical' style and dramatic conventions, particularly *Heavenly Creatures*, *Monster* and *The Reader*. Unlike *Antichrist*, *Trouble Every Day* and *Baise-moi*, these films do not reflexively expose the spectator's desire to know the violent woman, nor do they 'return' his or her gaze (the spectator is, rather, positioned as an omniscient observer of the

action). Instead, these films find ways to answer the spectator's desire, explicating the violent woman's deeds through the rhetorical power of plot. *Heavenly Creatures*, for example, imagines Juliet and Pauline as 'romantic subjects' by using the established narrative schemas of this genre. *Monster* provides context for Aileen Wuornos's actions using classical-biographical form, linking her violence to her experiences in the social world. *The Reader* uses the narrative frameworks of psychologically realistic melodrama to convey the violent woman's interiority, thus modelling Hanna Schmitz on a culturally prevalent notion of the self as cognizant. Considered alongside *Antichrist*, *Trouble Every Day* and *Baise-moi*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Monster* and *The Reader* show that cinema's exploration of violent femininity occurs on multiple textual levels – via narrative discourse *and* through the process of spectatorship.

By scrutinising these films this book has been able to explore in detail the different ways that cinema engages with the violent woman as transgressor and enigma. The films that I have chosen are illustrative examples due to their construction as 'distinguished' texts; however, they are not the only films that centralise the desire for knowledge of the violent woman. Such drives are present in numerous film examples hailing from art and independent cinema contexts. Some of these I have already mentioned in the course of my analysis, such as *De stilte rond Christine M* (English title: *A Question of Silence*; Marleen Gorris, 1982), *Sister My Sister* (Nancy Meckler, 1994), *Fun* (Rafal Zielinski, 1994), *Butterfly Kiss* (Michael Winterbottom, 1995), *La Cérémonie* (Claude Chabrol, 1995), *I Shot Andy Warhol* (Mary Harron, 1996) and *Il y a longtemps que je t'aime* (English title: *I've Loved You So Long*; Philippe Claudel, 2008), whereas others include the science-fiction film *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013), the true crime drama *I Am You* (alternative title: *In Her Skin*; Simone North, 2009) and the independent film *Bubble* (Steven Soderbergh, 2005). These additional texts show that the enigma is a significant trope in the representation of violent femininity. In each of these films, she is also the focus of a cinematic hypothesising of subjectivity. In order to demonstrate cinema's continuing curiosity about the violent woman, I shall briefly consider the texts *Under the Skin*, *I Am You* and *Bubble*.

A 'certain opaque quality': *Under the Skin, Bubble* and *I Am You*

One of the most explicit iterations of the violent woman as a mysterious entity – and one that employs style to hypothesise personhood – is

Under the Skin. An adaptation of Michel Faber's 2000 novel of the same name, the film concerns an alien seductress (Scarlett Johansson) who develops personhood following her formative contact with humanity. The film begins when she mysteriously arrives on the outskirts of Glasgow in Scotland. After purchasing some revealing clothing and red lipstick, she begins driving around the city streets, flirtatiously offering lifts to solitary men. Eventually, the film reveals her agenda: she invites the men to an abandoned house where she removes her clothes and lures them into a reservoir of black liquid. Trapped inside, the men are violently separated from their skin and their bodies are destroyed. After repeating this process several times, the alien suddenly ceases her activities and begins to wander around the Scottish countryside. Eventually, she is attacked and killed by a stranger.

Employing an evocative style and *mise-en-scène*, *Under the Skin* shows the alien's transformation from a predator who is driven by instinct to a woman conflicted by doubt and fear. As Glazer says of his film, 'I wanted to find a visual language to tell this story in an unexpected way and to follow the alien's journey from id to "it" to "she"' (cited in Xan Brooks 2013: n.p.). Accordingly, *Under the Skin* initially presents the protagonist as an esoteric being, using the trope of the violent female enigma as a starting point for an exploration of personhood. The alien's origins are not explained and no one refers to her by name in the film. Johansson's performance also cultivates an air of inscrutability, particularly in the film's first half; as critic Sady Doyle observes in an article on Johansson's persona, she has 'a certain opaque quality' that she brings to the role: 'we're never entirely sure what her characters are thinking. These characters start out blank, without complicated inner lives, and then develop inner lives so complicated we can't hope to comprehend them' (2014: n.p.). In keeping with Doyle's analysis, several point of view shots in the early part of *Under the Skin* indicate that the alien's gaze is trained solely upon men as they walk the streets of Glasgow. Little else seems to rouse her interest. In one scene, she watches impassively as a man and a woman drown in heavy surf at the beach. Filmed in long shot, the woman, the man and the dog all appear vulnerable from her point of view; she intervenes only when it becomes possible to kidnap a male swimmer who has attempted to rescue the unfortunate people. As the story progresses, however, *Under the Skin* gradually changes its 'visual language' to indicate the awakening of the alien's thoughts. The second half of the film contains several long, static shots of Johansson's character looking at herself in the mirror or contemplating the fog that covers the countryside. In these meditative moments,

Under the Skin shows her burgeoning subjectivity – a personhood that consists of, as Doyle observe, a complex inner life. The film thus produces its protagonist's subjectivity by fashioning her interiority via the mechanisms of film style. Like *The Reader*, *Under the Skin* emphasises the significance of thoughts as constitutive of subjectivity; unlike *The Reader*, however, *Under the Skin* conveys these thoughts via a contemplative aesthetic rather than through a melodramatic narrative mode.

Bubble concerns a very different kind of perplexing, violent woman; however, it, too, comments on its protagonists' ontology via aesthetic and narrative strategies. The film is about three working-class Americans: middle-aged Martha (Debbie Doebereiner), her young friend Kyle (Dustin James Ashley) and Rose (Misty Dawn Wilkins), a single mother who takes a job at the factory where Kyle and Martha work. During her first day on the job, Rose establishes an uneasy friendship with Martha and engages in a mild flirtation with Kyle. Martha, who enjoys an exclusive friendship with Kyle, does not welcome Rose's arrival. After only a short time in town, Rose is found strangled in her home and Martha is revealed as the killer. Like Johansson in *Under the Skin*, Doebereiner cultivates an impenetrable air in her performance of Martha. Whether speaking to her friend Kyle or interjecting in a confrontation between Rose and her ex-partner, Martha has a cautious and restrained quality. This is compounded by the fact that Martha is also quite inarticulate. For example, she does not know how to explain her disapproval of Rose except to say, 'I don't know . . . she scares me.' Although she is very far removed from the sexually alluring *femme fatale* embodied by Johansson's alien in *Under the Skin*, Martha, too, is an elusive figure. Indeed, Martha herself is not even initially aware of her own violent behaviour and is thus a mystery even to herself. The final scene of the film shows her 'recalling' the murder, flashing back to a shot of Rose's dead body as Martha, incarcerated in prison in the diegetic present, gasps in horror.

Set among America's working poor, Martha as a female enigma in *Bubble* operates as an expressive device that exposes the economic forces that shape individuals. Through both its narrative mechanisms and style, *Bubble* ascribes fiscal aetiologies to human interactions. On one level, it is possible to interpret Martha's violence as an expression of her jealousy towards Rose, a scenario that would attribute Martha's actions to her feminine emotional volatility. A closer examination of the film's style and narrative, however, shows that *Bubble* treats emotions as a product of economics. As the film makes clear, Martha is a member of American's working poor, a woman who will likely never escape her

circumstances. She works a low-paying job at a doll factory, has no partner or children, and cares for her ailing father in the evening. She gains a modicum of power, however, through her friendship with Kyle, whom she drives to work every day. The little authority that this relationship affords Martha is of obvious significance alongside her otherwise significant material and social lack. Martha's friendship with the young man takes on a palliative significance in the world of *Bubble*, demonstrating that economic power and human relationships are highly imbricated in this milieu. As Roger Ebert explains, what Martha most wants is 'a form of possession' of Kyle (2006: n.p.). When threatened with Kyle's removal, her explosive act of violence articulates the emotional and psychic toll of her material deprivation. In support of this narrative scenario, the film's style also plays a central role in highlighting the link between poverty and human emotion. *Bubble* is filmed on high-definition video, the performers are local non-actors, and the film is set on location on the border of Ohio and West Virginia, an economically disadvantaged area of the United States. These filmmaking decisions are not simply an experimental affectation; rather, the aesthetic austerity of *Bubble* informs the broader positioning of its characters as fiscally disadvantaged subjects (indeed, this use of video links *Bubble* to *Baise-moi*, which also uses its medium to convey the deprivations of the world it shows). Through its converging stylistic and narrative mechanisms, *Bubble* therefore presents the violent woman as an economic subject, an individual whose actions are determined by financial forces.

A third film example that uses the violent woman to discuss femininity – this time through the manoeuvres of biographical narrative – is the true crime drama *I Am You*. The film tells the story of a young woman, Caroline Robertson (Ruth Bradley), who murders an attractive and talented teenage girl, Rachel Barber (Kate Bell), in a desire to assume her identity. The narrative is based on actual events: a former babysitter and neighbour of her victim, Robertson, aged nineteen, murdered fifteen-year-old Barber in March 1999 and buried her body in a rural area outside of Melbourne, Australia. Like the similarly 'true' stories recounted in *Monster* and *Heavenly Creatures*, *I Am You* is undergirded by an impulse to explain the causes of Caroline Robertson's actions. The young woman is first presented to viewers as a shadowy, threatening figure: the film's opening sequence portrays her only in silhouette, standing triumphantly over Rachel's grave. Caroline does not remain enigmatic for long, however. As the narrative progresses, the viewer is introduced to the unhappy young woman, who expresses

her innermost thoughts through the device of a confessional voice-over. In these moments, Caroline articulates a vehement dislike of her physical appearance, revealing that she considers herself ugly, overweight and worthless. She also expresses envy towards her former neighbour, Rachel, who is slim and beautiful. As these confessional moments reveal, Caroline's motive for murdering Rachel thus originates from a delusional belief that she can transcend her hated identity and assume Rachel's feminine perfection through murder. Caroline's desire is given further explanation when, in flashback, it is revealed that she feels unloved by her father.

Much like *Monster*, *I Am You* constructs Caroline as a product of her formative childhood experiences rather than as an intrinsically perverse woman; like *Monster*, *I Am You* uses narrative causality to conceptualise subjectivity as a teleological phenomenon. By showing her unhappy teenage years, her parents' acrimonious divorce and her poor self-esteem, the plot attributes Caroline's violence to adolescent feelings of inadequacy. *I Am You* also suggests that, whilst femininity is a phenomenon that can be acquired by possessing the correct physical attributes – such as slimness, beauty and physical grace – it is nonetheless a trait that is difficult for women to embody. As Caroline discovers, transformation is not easy. Even after she kills Rachel and begins dressing in her clothes, Caroline clearly is not the woman she wishes to be. Rachel's clothes fit awkwardly on her body; even worse, her father remains cold and unloving towards her. *I Am You* thus resembles *Monster* insofar as both narratives dramatise the unbridgeable distance between actual and idealised femininity and the violence that this distance can produce. Indeed, women's aggression in *I Am You* is not a consequence of women's perversity but, rather, a product of Caroline's inability to conform to gender ideals.

As these short analyses demonstrate, *Under the Skin*, *Bubble* and *I Am You* each commence their narratives by positioning the violent woman as an unknown. She starts out, to use Doane's words, as an 'epistemological trauma' in these films (1991: 1). Yet, like the other texts considered in this book, *Under the Skin*, *Bubble* and *I Am You* subsequently respond to the conceptual deficiencies that the violent woman exposes, employing both narrative and stylistic means to articulate her interiority and experience. In keeping with Sinnerbrink's description of cinema's philosophical capacity, these films initiate a filmic 'questioning, reflecting, or disclosing' (2011: 133). Moreover, they do so cinematically through the processes of spectatorship and narrative: 'through the artful

use of narrative, performance or cinematic presentation (montage, performance, visual style or metafilmic reflection)' (Sinnerbrink 2011: 133). Cinema as a creative medium can thus respond to the challenge of violent femininity; this response can, in turn, be constitutive of cinema's pleasure for audiences.

Whilst the violent woman is an enduring and ubiquitous figure in cinema, she nevertheless remains provocative. As she appears in both esteemed art texts and critically derided exploitation films, the violent woman problematises the deeply entrenched concepts of femininity and masculinity that have pervaded Western thought since antiquity. Women who commit violent deeds undermine conceptions of female passivity and male aggression; they also recall the contradictory idea of women as 'more deadly than the male'. Such women are antagonistic, exposing inconsistencies in cultural notions of gender; they 'call into question our conceptions of masculinity and femininity, and reveal the limits of, or failures of, ideology' (Neroni 2005: ix–x). The violent woman's significance, however, is not confined solely to the way that she exposes the limitations of existing ideological structures, nor is her power restricted to her ability to shock audiences with her cruelty or aggression. Through her cultural construction as an enigma, the violent woman precipitates a creative rethinking of gendered subjectivity in cinema. She impels cultural discourse – including film – to account for the possibility that women, too, can be violent.

Notes

Introduction

1. For analyses of violent women cinema that consider race, see the work of L.S. Kim (2006), Yvonne D. Sims (2006) and Stephane Dunn (2008); for considerations of sexuality, see publications by Andrea Weiss (1992), Lynda Hart (1994), B. Ruby Rich (1995), Judith Mayne (2000), Chris Holmlund (2002) and Nicole Richter (2013); questions of post-feminist sensibility and neoliberalist ideology emerge in the work of Lisa Coulthard (2007), Claudia Herbst (2004) and Rebecca Stringer (2011); and considerations of genre include the work of Carol Clover (1992), Barbara Creed (1993) and Yvonne Tasker (1993).
2. For example, *Women in Film Noir*, first published in 1978 and then republished with additional material in 1998, is described by its publisher as 'one of the classic course texts of film studies' (back cover); Creed's work has appeared in several anthologies, such as Barry Keith Grant's *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, Sue Thornham's *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* and Shohini Chaudhuri's *Feminist Film Theorists*; and Clover's theorisations of identification and the 'Final Girl' have become important concepts in studies on horror cinema (Jancovich 2002a: 58).
3. For example, Jeffrey Sconce provides an extended discussion of alternative cinematic taste-categories in his article '"Trashing" the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style' (1995).
4. Festivals accredited by the FIAPF include the Berlin International Film Festival, the Venice Film Festival, the Cannes International Film Festival and, for non-competitive purposes, the Toronto International Film Festival.
5. Pierre Bourdieu's work on taste also characterises the consumption of art as an interpretive practice. According to Bourdieu, cultural goods cannot be comprehended by a consumer unless she or he understands the conceptual paradigms associated with that text. Such interpretive practice in a film context might consist of an intertextual awareness of the director's style, an understanding of the tenets of European modernism or formal training in textual criticism. As such, the enjoyment of art is an act of 'deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code' (1977: 2).
6. Such character-centredness in contemporary art and independent cinema can, in part, be ascribed to commercial rather than aesthetic imperatives. As Michael Z. Newman writes regarding the 'indie' genre, 'films about ordinary people's day to day lives can be relatively cheap to produce and lend themselves to the kinds of performances that win accolades and impress festival and art house audiences' (2011: 89).
7. Mary Ann Doane observes that the racial connotations of Freud's phrase 'dark continent' are often overlooked. As she explains, the term originally referred to the continent of Africa, which, in the nineteenth-century colonial imagination, was 'dark' both in the sense of being 'unexplored', and also

racially 'dark' because of the skin tone of its inhabitants (1991: 209–10). In much feminist critical writing, however, the phrase 'dark continent' is used to refer more generally to the construction of women's unknowability in psychoanalysis.

8. As Thomas Elsaesser observes, films of different nationalities *can* be discussed together in terms of their shared heritage in global art cinema practice. He writes, 'Hal Hartley, Richard Linklater . . . Kim Ki-Duk, Abbas Kiarostami and Lars von Trier have, it sometimes seems, more in common with each other than with directors of their respective national cinemas' (2005: 18). This is because the worldwide festival circuit has given rise to a discernible set of global styles and aesthetic trends: 'art cinema directors share with their audiences a cinephile universe of film historical references, which favors the evolution of a norm that could be called the international festival film' (2005: 18).

1 Horror, Hysteria and Female Malaise: *Antichrist*

1. Throughout this chapter, I refer to the male and female protagonists of *Antichrist* as 'the Man' and 'the Woman' respectively. Both characters are nameless within the film (and are credited only as 'He' and 'She').
2. Critics who describe *Antichrist* as 'confused' include Catherine Wheatley (2009) and Larry Gross (2009); critics who question the film's gender politics include Mette Hjort (2011), Julie Bindel (cited in Brooks 2009) and Scott Foundas (2009).

2 Science, Sensation and the Female Monster: *Trouble Every Day*

1. As Joan Hawkins observes in her analysis of the art-horror film, horror aesthetics and themes have appeared in art and avant-garde texts from as early as the 1920s. Examples include the works of filmmakers as diverse as F.W. Murnau, Luis Buñuel, Georges Franju and Alain Resnais (2000: 53, 65). As such, the shock that many critics experienced upon seeing *Trouble Every Day* at Cannes occurred largely irrespective of the fact that horror tropes have long appeared in art films.
2. Denis's awards and recognitions include the Golden Leopard and Prize of the Ecumenical Jury – Special Mention at the Locarno International Film Festival (*Nenette and Boni*); Reader Jury of the 'Berliner Zeitung' – Special Mention at the Berlin International Film Festival (*Beau Travail)*; and the Kring van Nederlandse Filmjournalisten Award – Special Mention at Rotterdam International Film Festival (*Beau Travail*).
3. See, for example, the essays and articles by Samantha Dinning (2009), Fiachra Gibbons and Stuart Jeffries (2001) and Laura McMahon (2007: 77).
4. For examples of such praise, see critical writings by Martine Beugnet (2007: 33), Judith Mayne (2005: 110) and Laura McMahon (2007: 78).
5. Indeed, this association between femininity and unruliness becomes a source of knowing and sexist humour in *Species*. During a conversation with a worldly male bounty hunter hired to assassinate Sil, scientist Xavier Fitch

(Ben Kingsley) explains that he chose to create a female alien to ensure that the resultant creature would be 'more docile and controllable'; the bounty hunter quips in response, 'More docile and controllable, eh? Well, I guess you guys don't get out much.' Such dialogue demonstrates the continuing conflict between conceptualisations of femininity as both passive and volatile.

6. In *Splice*, Dren also has sexual intercourse with her female creator, Elsa (Sarah Polley). During the film's climax, Dren spontaneously transforms into a male and rapes Elsa, impregnating her and murdering Elsa's partner.

3 Sex and Self-Expression: Fatal Women in *Baise-moi*

1. See, for example, the commentaries by Lisa Nesselson (2000), Gary Morris (2001) and Alix Sharkey (2002).
2. As I indicate in the paragraphs above, this chapter considers constructions of heterosexuality only. Films such as *Butterfly Kiss*, *Sister My Sister*, *Heavenly Creatures* and *Fun* also investigate the sexuality of their queer and lesbian protagonists, and the issues concerning the killer lesbian's representation partially intersect with those surrounding the heterosexual murderess. Phallocentric discourse produces both the killer lesbian's sexuality and the heterosexual seductress's desire as esoteric and Other through a process of exclusion. The violent lesbian, however, has her own history of representation, as well as a wealth of research written exclusively about her. As I explain in Chapter 4, theorisations of the Sapphic vampire and the 'pathological' homosexual form an important context for the representation of lesbianism in films such as *Heavenly Creatures*. In contrast, this chapter draws on scholarship that deals primarily with representations of heterosexuality, including theorisations of women in pornography. As such, I consider the construction of lesbian sexuality separately in Chapter 4.
3. See, for example, Judith Franco (2003), Gary Morris (2001) and Leila Wimmer (2011).
4. See, for example, James Quandt (2004) and Leila Wimmer (2011).
5. As Sjoberg and Gentry note, the term 'erotomania' also has a specific clinical definition in psychology. It is 'a rare disorder in which a person holds a delusional belief that another person, usually of a higher social status, is in love with them. It is also called de Clerambault's syndrome, after French psychiatrist Gaetan Gatian de Clerambault' (2007: 47). However, Sjoberg and Gentry use the term 'erotomania' in accordance with its lay meaning – an overwhelming, disordered and disabling desire for sex. I also use this meaning in this book.
6. See, for example, Dominique Russell (2010) and Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (2011).
7. These translations of Despentes's original novel are sourced from the English-language version of *Baise-moi*, published as *Baise-Moi = Rape Me: A Novel* (1999) and translated by Bruce Benderson.
8. An example of this can be found in Roget Ebert's description of his experience at a screening of *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978). Ebert writes that a number of male audience members cheered during the film's infamous twenty-minute rape sequence. Afterwards, he writes, he felt 'unclean' and

'depressed'; although Ebert did not condone rape himself, he felt implicated by his proximity to the audience members who did in fact side with the rapists (1980: n.p.). By portraying the rape scene with the conventions of maximum visibility, *Baise-moi* invokes a similar wish not to identify with the attackers.

9. As Chapter 6 explains, *The Reader* concerns a young man's traumatic realisation that his lover, Hanna (Kate Winslet), is a former *Schutzstaffel* guard, a revelation that conflicts with his tender feelings towards her. The shock of the protagonist's discovery is reinforced by the film's visual regimes, which initially present Hanna as an object of idealised feminine beauty. Most of the intimate moments between the two protagonists in the film conform to a popular cinematic aesthetic of 'ideal' or 'idealised' sex (Krzywinska 2006: 32). Such scenes adopt the conventions of soft-core cinema, such as soft focus, warmly coloured lighting and tasteful framing that obscures genital contact. This attractive aesthetic, of course, contrasts significantly with the brutality of Hanna's actions while working at Auschwitz concentration camp. Thus, unlike *Baise-moi*, hetero-erotic spectacle in *The Reader* is not communicative; rather, it obscures Hanna's 'true' nature in order to convey the shock of the protagonist's discovery of her violence.

4 Romance and the Lesbian Couple: *Heavenly Creatures*

1. This view of romance as having persuasive ideological power contrasts with much of the critical scepticism directed at romance by cultural authorities. With the exception of a notable few films that have been critically legitimised, such as *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *Doctor Zhivago* (David Lean, 1965) and *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen, 1977), films dedicated primarily to a love relationship are most often associated with the genres intended for female audiences. They are therefore marginal in a film culture where masculine subjectivity is so central (Doane 1987: 97). Mary Ann Doane explains that, historically, cultural authority (particularly that of the traditionally male-dominated, bourgeois film institutions in Western culture, such as academia) considered romance a suspect genre because it is emotionally manipulative, representing fantasies rather than real life (1987: 96–7, 114–15). Nevertheless, the romantic subplots that are common to classical Hollywood films provide audiences with a point of textual recognition and familiarity, thus acquainting viewers with non-heteronormative relationships.
2. In his account of the classical romance, Shumway reminds his readers that love has not always been viewed positively: some earlier tales and myths characterise love as a 'destructive passion', as well as a poor basis for marriage (2003: 13). Shumway cites as an example Nizami's twelfth-century Persian poem *Layla and Majnun*, a story in which the male protagonist of the tale is so stricken by passion that he descends into madness.
3. Although *Heavenly Creatures* constructs the violent lesbian subject by securing the spectators' identification, a potential counter-argument to these assertions is that the actual murder scene does not necessarily guarantee the spectator's continuing sympathy. Juliet and Pauline's killing of Honora Parker is prolonged, brutal and intimate. Honora screams in pain and horror

throughout, potentially evoking the spectator's sympathy and severing his or her identification with the two girls. Moreover, the narrative quite clearly demonstrates that Honora Parker is, at heart, a well-intentioned woman who does not deserve to die in such horrific circumstances. This poses a problem for the film's strategy of providing a 'view from the inside' of the killer lesbian's experience. However, I would argue that the scene allows for simultaneous identification with both the girls and their victim. It is a moment that expresses both aggression *and* suffering, and is particularly affecting for this reason.

5 Film Biography and the Female Killer: *Monster*

1. For example, although it is an independently produced film, Patty Jenkins's biopic *Monster* is the second most commercially successful text examined in this book, earning approximately US $34 million in domestic takings and far surpassing the likes of other key texts, such as *Antichrist* and *Heavenly Creatures*. The US domestic gross for *Antichrist* is $404,122, and for *Heavenly Creatures* $3,049,135. All amounts are quoted in USD and are not adjusted for inflation. The highest-earning film in this book is Stephen Daldry's 2008 adaptation of Bernhard Schlink's bestselling 1995 novel *The Reader*, taking over $34 million in earnings. All box-office figures in this book are sourced from *Box Office Mojo*. Although Kristin Thompson cautions that this website is not useful for precisely assessing the total revenue of older films (specifically because the task of historical data collection is too complex), she argues that *Box Office Mojo* is an acceptable source of information when determining the financial success of contemporary, and contemporaneous, films (2011: 38). This book therefore follows Thompson's example and uses *Box Office Mojo* to give a comparative indication of the economic success of selected films, where relevant.
2. Also significant is the fact that biographical films, partly on account of their focus on public lives and deeds, have been dominated by male protagonists: Custen calculates that 35 per cent of biopics produced in Hollywood during the studio era (1927–60) are about women, increasing to only 39 per cent in the post-studio era (1992: 144). Carolyn Anderson's survey of biographical films from 1929 to 1986 found that only 28 per cent of these texts focused on the lives of women (1988: 336). Unsurprisingly, then, homicidal, marginalised women like Aileen Wuornos have been infrequent subjects of biographical cinema.
3. Indeed, such epistemophilic desire is important even in biopics that query whether the subject can be known at all, such as Todd Haynes's *I'm Not There*. In this film, American singer-songwriter Bob Dylan is represented by six different characters and actors. This casting and narrative decision also, paradoxically, make a statement about subjectivity; namely, that personhood is too complex to be represented cinematically using one plot or actor.
4. Notably, this is a near-identical sentiment to one expressed by Stella Dallas (née Martin) in Vidor's film. After going to the cinema with her beau, Stephen, Stella claims she wants to 'be like the people in the movie – you

know, do everything well-bred and refined'. This suggests that the linking of beauty with personal happiness is not an uncommon theme in melodrama.
5. See, for instance, articles by David Denby (2008), Bruce Feld (2003), Owen Gleiberman (2004), Stephen Holden (2003), Kirk Honeycutt (2003) and Leonard Quart (2004).

6 Evincing the Interior: Violent Femininity in *The Reader*

1. For an extended discussion of The Weinstein's Company's marketing and distribution strategy for *The Reader*, see Simone Murray's chapter on the film's adaptation (2012b).
2. See, for example, Peter Galvin (2009) and David Jays (2009).
3. As an example, Staiger cites the paradigmatic noir film *Double Indemnity*, wherein Walter Neff's series of bad choices – such as his impulse to imprudently flirt with Phyllis Dietrichson, his decision to collude in the double indemnity fraud and his willingness to deceive his boss – all dramatise his descent into immorality. However, another consequence of the plot's onscreen reconstruction of Neff's decision-making is that it constructs him as a subject who possesses agency; that is, having the capacity to effect action via his conscious will.
4. This is not to suggest that violent women of earlier noir and thriller films have no motivations whatsoever. Chris Straayer (2012) and Julie Grossman (2007), for example, both challenge the accepted view of the *femme fatale* as a passive figure, arguing that there are in fact very good reasons why she resorts to violence. The fatal woman's underhanded dealings, Straayer reasons, are likely born of her determination to secure her financial future in the wake of the Great Depression. Greed is a sign of her desire for independence, and her sexual manipulations are a means of survival in a context where women experienced structural economic disadvantage. Grossman makes a similar claim and argues that the misreading of the *femme fatale* has occurred because 'critics have settled in their discussion of women in noir on the few female characters who conform to the notion of the quintessential *femme fatale* (as she is represented by Phyllis Dietrichson [*Double Indemnity*], Kathie Moffatt [*Out of the Past*], and Brigid O'Shaughnessy [*The Maltese Falcon*])' (2007: 19). However, I would add that the *femme fatale*'s rationales are usually poorly explained in classic noir narratives: as Straayer writes, the 'sex-based underclass status of women . . . received little generic sympathy' in a form whose allegiance is so frequently given over to an embattled male character (2012: 221). Due to the genre's emphasis on the masculine perspective, the image of the passive, unconscious woman has consequently taken on an enduring significance in the popular cultural imagination (rather than the interpretations offered by Grossman and Straayer). Hence, it is this image to which *The Reader* responds.
5. There are some notable exceptions to this tendency. For instance, in the neo-noir *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), the viewer is led to believe that Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone) has a dazzlingly complex intellect that allows her to predict the hero's movements, devise elaborate schemes and evade capture. Yet, like many noir and thriller films, the narrative only ever

takes the male protagonist's point of view. Catherine's actions are therefore given the effect of impulsiveness and improvisation rather than conscious deliberation.

6. See, for instance, reviews by Peter Galvin (2009) and Evan Williams (2009).
7. British Actress of the Year for *Heavenly Creatures*, 16th London Film Critics' Circle Awards, 1996; Best Actress in a Supporting Role for *Sense and Sensibility*, 49th British Academy Film Awards, 1996; Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Supporting Role for *Sense and Sensibility*, 2nd Screen Actors Guild Awards, 1996; British Actress of the Year for *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, 25th London Film Critics' Circle Awards, 2005 (shared with Eva Birthistle for *Ae Fond Kiss . . .* [Ken Loach, 2004]).
8. For an example of the interest in Winslet's body, see Vicki Reid (1999); for examples of tabloid stories about her children's parentage, see Alison Boshoff (2013), Peter Gicas (2013) and Tim Walker (2013)

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Selected Filmography

À l'intérieur, dir. Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury (La Fabrique de Films, 2008)
Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer, dir. Nick Broomfield (Channel 4 Television Corporation, 1992)
Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer, dir. Nick Broomfield and Joan Churchill (Lafayette Films, 2003)
Alien, dir. Ridley Scott (Brandywine Productions, 1979)
Alien: Resurrection, dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet (Brandywine Productions, 1997)
Alien^3, dir. David Fincher (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1992)
Aliens, dir. James Cameron (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1986)
Antichrist, dir. Lars von Trier (Zentropa Entertainments, 2009)
Der Baader Meinhof Komplex, dir. Uli Edel (Constantin Film Produktion, 2008)
The Babadook, dir. Jennifer Kent (Causeway Films, 2014)
Baise-moi, dir. Coralie Trinh Thi and Virginie Despentes (Canal+, 2000)
Bandit Queen, dir. Shekhar Kapur (Channel Four Films, 1994)
Basic Instinct, dir. Paul Verhoeven (Carolco Pictures, 1992)
Bonnie and Clyde, dir. Arthur Penn (Warner Brothers/Seven Arts, 1967)
The Book of Revelation, dir. Ana Kokkinos (Film Finance, 2006)
The Brood, dir. David Cronenberg (Canadian Film Development Corporation, 1979)
Bubble, dir. Steven Soderbergh (Magnolia Pictures, 2006)
Butterfly Kiss, dir. Michael Winterbottom (British Screen Productions, 1995)
Captive Wild Woman. dir. Edward Dmytryk (Universal Pictures, 1943)
Carrie, dir. Brian De Palma (United Artists, 1976)
Carrie, dir. Kimberly Peirce (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2013)
Cat People, dir. Jacques Tourneur (RKO Radio Pictures, 1942)
La Cérémonie, dir. Claude Chabrol (France 3 Cinéma, 1995)
Charlie's Angels, dir. McG (Columbia TriStar, 2001)
Cleopatra Jones, dir. Jack Starrett (Warner Bros, 1973)
The Countess, dir. Julie Delpy (Serenity Film, 2009)
Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, dir. Ang Lee (Asia Union Film & Entertainment Ltd, 2000)
Daughters of Darkness, dir. Harry Kümel (Showking Films, 1971)
Double Indemnity, dir. Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1944)
Dracula's Daughter, dir. Lambert Hillyer (Universal Pictures, 1936)
Dream Home [*Wai dor lei ah yut ho*], dir. Pang Ho-Cheung (852 Films, 2010)
Elsa Fräulein SS, dir. Mike Staar (Eurociné, 1977)
Excision, dir. Richard Bates Jr (New Normal Films, 2012)
Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill! dir. Russ Meyer (Eve Productions, 1965)
Fatal Attraction, dir. Adrian Lyne (Paramount Pictures, 1987)
La Femme Nikita, dir. Luc Besson (Gaumont, 1990)
Foxy Brown, dir. Jack Hill (American International Pictures, 1974)
Fun, dir. Rafal Zielinski (Greycat Films/Neo Modern Entertainment, 1994)
Gilda, dir. Charles Vidor (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1946)

GoldenEye, dir. Martin Campbell (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1995)
Gun Crazy, dir. Joseph H. Lewis (King Brothers Productions, 1950)
A Gun for Jennifer, dir. Todd Morris (Independent Partners, 1997)
Haywire, dir. Steven Soderbergh (Relativity Media, 2011)
Heavenly Creatures, dir. Peter Jackson (WingNut Films, 1994)
Helga, She Wolf of Spilberg, dir. Alain Garnier (Eurociné, 1977)
The Hunger Games, dir. Gary Ross (Lionsgate, 2012)
The Hunger Games: Catching Fire, dir. Francis Lawrence (Color Force, 2013)
The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 1, dir. Francis Lawrence (Color Force, 2013)
The Hunger, dir. Tony Scott (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1983)
I Shot Andy Warhol, dir. Mary Harron (Playhouse International Pictures, 1996)
I Spit on Your Grave, dir. Meir Zarchi (Cinemagic Pictures, 1978)
I've Loved You So Long [*Il y a longtemps que je t'aime*], dir. Philippe Claudel (UCG, 2008)
Ilsa, Harem Keeper of the Oil Sheiks, dir. Don Edmonds (Mount Everest Enterprises, 1976)
Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS, dir. Don Edmonds (Aeteas Filmproduktions, 1975)
Ilsa, the Tigress of Siberia, dir. Jean LaFleur (Mount Everest Enterprises, 1977)
Ilsa, the Wicked Warden, dir. Jesús Franco (Elite Film, 1977)
Island of Lost Souls, dir. Erle C. Kenton (Paramount Pictures, 1932)
Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, dir. Chantal Akerman (Ministère de la Culture Française de Belgique, 1975)
Jennifer's Body, dir. Karyn Kusama (Fox Atomic, 2009)
The Jungle Captive, dir. Harold Young (Universal, 1945)
Jungle Woman, dir. Reginald Le Borg (Universal, 1944)
Kick-Ass, dir. Matthew Vaughn (Marv Films, 2010)
Kill Bill Vol. 1, dir. Quentin Tarantino (Miramax, 2003)
Kill Bill Vol. 2, dir. Quentin Tarantino (Miramax, 2004)
The Last Seduction, dir. John Dahl (Artisan, 2002)
The Long Kiss Goodnight, dir. Renny Harlin (Forge, 1996)
The Maltese Falcon, dir. John Huston (Warner Bros, 1941)
Mildred Pierce, dir. Michael Curtiz (Warner Bros, 1945)
Monster, dir. Patty Jenkins (Media 8 Entertainment, 2003)
Ms .45, dir. Abel Ferrara (Navaron Films, 1981)
Natural Born Killers, dir. Oliver Stone (Warner Bros, 1994)
La Novia Ensangrentada, dir. Vicente Aranda (Morgana Films, 1972)
Nurse 3D, dir. Douglas Aarniokoski (Lions Gate Entertainment, 2013)
Ôdishon, dir. Takashi Miike (Basara Pictures, 1999)
Out of Sight, dir. Steven Soderbergh (Universal, 1998)
Out of the Past, dir. Jacques Tourneur (RKO Radio Pictures, 1947)
Proxy, dir. Zack Parker (Along the Tracks, 2013)
A Question of Silence [*De stilte rond Christine M.*], dir. Marleen Gorris (Sigma Film Productions, 1982)
The Reader, dir. Stephen Daldry (The Weinstein Company, 2008)
The Reptile, dir. John Gilling (Hammer, 1966)
Set It Off, dir. F. Gary Gray (Roadshow, 1996)
Side Effects, dir. Steven Soderbergh (Endgame Entertainment, 2013)
Single White Female, dir. Barbet Schroeder (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1992)
Sister My Sister, dir. Nancy Meckler (British Screen Productions, 1994)

Species II, dir. Peter Medak (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1998)
Species III, dir. Brad Turner (FGM Entertainment, 2004)
Species, dir. Roger Donaldson (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1995)
Splice, dir. Vincenzo Natali (Gaumont, 2009)
Stella Dallas, dir. King Vidor (Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1937)
Strange Days, dir. Kathryn Bigelow (Universal, 1995)
Suburban Mayhem, dir. Paul Goldman (Icon, 2006)
Sucker Punch, dir. Zack Snyder (Warner Bros, 2011)
Sympathy for Lady Vengeance, dir. Park Chan-wook (CJ Capital Investment, 2005)
Teeth, dir. Mitchell Lichtenstein (Pierpoline Films, 2007)
Thelma & Louise, dir. Ridley Scott (Pathé Entertainment, 1992)
To Die For, dir. Gus van Sant (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1995)
Trouble Every Day, dir. Claire Denis (Arte, 2001)
Under the Skin, dir. Jonathan Glazer (Film4, 2013)
The Vampire Lovers, dir. Roy Ward Baker (American International Pictures, 1970)
Wild Things, dir. John McNaughton (Columbia TriStar, 1998)
The Woman, dir. Lucky McKee (Modernciné, 2011)

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