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**The "Fatal Femme" in Contemporary Hollywood *Film Noir* :
Reframing Gender, Violence, and Power**

Julianne Pidduck

**A Thesis
In
The Department
of
Media Studies**

**Presented In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

July 1993

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ABSTRACT

The "Fatal Femme" in Contemporary Hollywood Film Noir : Reframing Gender, Violence, and Power

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This thesis examines the articulations of gender, power, and violence in relation to a recent cycle of Hollywood films which feature women who kill. This cycle presents a striking exception to the cinematic and general socio-discursive rule which typically figures women as passive victims of male violence. Through this emphasis on the exception, I choose to follow the productive potential routes of change which flow through any cultural field. The analysis incorporates two overlapping methodologies: "immanent textual criticism," and discursive analysis which is rooted in the regularities of film and genre. The moment of textual analysis draws out the complexities and textual openness within the case study of *Basic Instinct*. In the subsequent discursive analysis, I follow selected "lines of flight" out from the immanent analysis to examine key themes which relate to gender, violence, and power within this cycle of films in general. These themes include transgressive sexuality, violence, narrative containment, psychoanalysis, and the gendered gaze. Ultimately, the thesis moves beyond the exception/ rule dialectic, into a more complex and contingent understanding of the shifting ground of gendered power in contemporary Hollywood film.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: "New Hollywood" and the "Fatal Femme" Cycle	16
Chapter 3: Immanent Analysis	
Part 1: Tactile Regularities in <i>Basic Instinct</i>	46
Part 2: Immanent Analysis of <i>Basic Instinct</i>	60
Chapter 4: Speaking Sex and Selling Queers:	
The Limits and Potential of Camp and Irony	117
Chapter 5: The "Fatal Femme": Reworking Gender and Power	147
Bibliography	178
Appendix: Filmography	182

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This thesis will address two interrelated problems. First, I am interested in the pressing theoretical and political question of women, violence, and power as articulated through a cycle of contemporary *film noir* which features women who kill. Closely linked through generic production and marketing patterns, this 1992-93 Hollywood cycle includes *Basic Instinct*, *Final Analysis*, *Single White Female*, *Poison Ivy*, *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, *Body of Evidence*, *The Crush*, and *The Temp*. Within film and media generally and in many feminist writings, women are overwhelmingly depicted as victims of male aggression. And while this generalization is statistically and intuitively appealing, it is commonly universalized by feminists to a degree which is counter-productive. My purpose here is not to deny the occurrence of violence committed against women, but to complicate the picture somewhat — particularly in relation to debates around representation. Against a tapestry of seemingly unrelenting victimhood, I seize here on the potential of exceptions and rupture. In contrast with this predominant feminist and more general rhetoric of "violence against women," this current explosion of violent women on the silver screen presents an evocative challenge to established assumptions about gendered violence — and, more precisely, common articulations of gender and power.

Current feminist and more general policy positions on "violence against women" rely on what Foucault calls a "repressive hypothesis" about the nature of power. This hypothesis frames power as a static quantity which can be held by certain unchanging dominant groups (such as the bourgeoisie or men) and used against complementary disenfranchized groups (such as the proletariat or women). Such a model offers limited potential for change, as it effectively hands all power over to pre-ordained 'dominant

groups." In contrast to this model, in this thesis I take up Foucault's concept of the "micro-physics of power."

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them...¹

For Foucault, then, power functions *productively* through multiple relations, and especially through discourse. Power relations are never monolithic, never fixed, but always rife with contradiction and flux. The cycle of "fatal femme"² films considered here represents a significant reversal and potential transformation in the balance of violence and power in contemporary cinema.

As the second problematic of this thesis, I seek to develop methodological tools in step with Foucault's notion of the intrinsically productive nature of power. The problem of theorizing not only "repressive rules" (such as the undeniable prevalence of violence against women), but complex exceptions and counter-currents, calls for new strategies in cultural criticism. In this project, I seek to develop a flexible and hybrid approach which encompasses both the subtleties of textual systems, and overarching socio-discursive questions of gender, violence, and power. Through this methodological innovation, I seek to map out the forces of struggle, confrontation, and reversal which flow through the exceptional filmic figure of the 1990s "fatal femme."

¹ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction (Volume 1), trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 92.

² The term "fatal femme" is a reworking of the classic *film noir* figure of the *femme fatale*. This contemporary version of the traditional vamp highlights the increased violence and increased self-reflexivity of the 1990s incarnation. For a more complete description of the "fatal femme," see Chapter 2.

Feminist Discourses: "Violence Against Women"

Over the past twenty-five years, feminist theory has made a strong case for a seemingly systematic and universal dynamic of violence perpetrated by men against women. Through feminist theory and activism, the catch-phrase "violence against women" has developed into a powerful rhetorical category encompassing acts of violence in war, rape, incest, wife-battering, and murder. Years of feminist lobbying, as well as the ongoing litany of cases of violence and rape reported in the media (including, significantly in Canada, the 1989 Polytechnique Massacre)³ have contributed toward making "violence against women" a coherent discursive category, and a politically-charged one at that — as reflected and reinforced both through government policy⁴ initiatives and extensive media coverage.

Within many contemporary feminist writings, violence is consistently figured either as an ongoing "war" against women or as a more time-specific "backlash" against feminism. Marilyn French's The War Against Women exemplifies the radical feminist approach where all types of violence are lumped together as a transhistorical "war" waged by men against women. In a section of the book entitled "Individual Men's Physical War Against Women," French lists off staggering statistics and anecdotes of wife-battering, incest, rape, and murder from all parts of the world. She asserts that part of the male strategy in this war is to tabulate these crimes separately, "obscuring the fact

³ In the aftermath of the later-termed "Montreal Massacre," there was an explosion of print and electronic media coverage both of the event, and of violence against women in general. For example, the *Man Alive* special dealing with the massacre set out to make connections between Lépine's crime and misogyny and other crimes committed against women.

⁴ In classic Canadian style, the "Montreal Massacre" prompted a nation-wide enquiry entitled the "Panel on Violence Against Women." The increased popular and political currency of the notion of "violence against women" is reflected in recent legal and policy initiatives which seek to "protect" women (and sometimes children) from represented and actual violence. These include the 1992 "Butler ruling" on pornography which incorporated much feminist anti-pornography rhetoric. Also important are the June 1993 high-profile "kiddie porn" bill, and the "anti-stalking law" — two popular pieces of legislation passed by the outgoing Conservative government just before summer recess and an upcoming fall election. All this paperwork coincides, ironically, with unprecedented draconian cutbacks to women's shelters, clinics, and other front-line services provided to actual victims of violent crime.

that all male violence toward women is part of a concerted campaign."⁵ According to French, "some women [including French, presumably] believe that men are well on their way to exterminating women from the world through violent behaviour and oppressive policies."⁶

In her best-selling liberal feminist intervention Backlash, Susan Faludi situates "a spectacular rise in sexual violence against women" within the context of an interlocking and all-encompassing anti-feminist backlash. Faludi cites an alarming increase in rape and sex-related murders as part of a sweeping economic, political, and violent response to feminist gains.

The truth is that the last decade has seen a powerful counterassault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women. This counterassault is largely insidious; in a kind of pop-culture version of the Big Lie, it stands the truth boldly on its head and proclaims that the very steps that have elevated women's position have actually led to their downfall.⁷

While Faludi contends that the backlash is no simple conspiracy, her extensively-documented book describes an eerie coordination of anti-feminist forces in all spheres of American life. Significantly, she devotes an entire section of the book to popular culture. Here, the movie *Fatal Attraction* (1987) becomes for Faludi a key metaphor for the "Big Lie" in popular representation. The author describes the containment and murder of Alex (Glenn Close) within the film as a "public silencing ritual" meant to put feminists and career women in their place. French and Faludi represent dominant feminist positions on gendered violence and popular culture. Attempting to simultaneously address categories of "the real" and representation, they tend to collapse the two categories. Ultimately, this approach frames popular culture as a transparent conductor of patriarchal ideology. In

⁵ Marilyn French, The War Against Women (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992) 21.

⁶ French 200.

⁷ Susan Faludi, introduction, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (New York: Doubleday, 1991) xviii.

the process, they commonly gloss over the complexity of any particular text in an effort to stitch it into a larger trend of backlash or misogyny.

The relation between statistical violent crimes committed against women generally and mediated representations of these acts is a much-contested point of theory and policy. Feminist organizations such as Media Watch as well as the anti-pornography movement have insisted on a strong (often causal) connection between the pervasive objectification and dehumanization of women in all areas of cultural production on the one hand, and actual incidents of violence on the other. Particularly influential has been the anti-pornography feminist critique of the explosive effects of the sexualization of violence (or, inversely, the making-violent of sexuality).⁸ Such a "victim politics" approach, while carrying broad common sense appeal, relies on a static and repressive notion of power. These feminist voices tend to give short shrift to the dynamic and non-linear processes of change at work in all social spheres, including popular culture.

In light of the importance of the question of violence against women outlined above, I am particularly interested in the reversal of common patterns of gendered violence presented by the cycle of films figured around the "fatal femme." Following shifting ratings systems and subsequent transformations in genre, contemporary thrillers display considerably more graphic violence than earlier films. And, broadly speaking, current suspense films still overwhelmingly feature women as victims. Until very recently, there has been very little feminist work looking in detail into the gender dynamics of violent suspense films.⁹ In the absence of such analysis, there has been a strong

⁸ During the 1980s and 1990s "sex war" debates in North America, many feminists challenged this monolithic victim worldview, seeking to reclaim a space of agency for female sexuality. Underrepresented in the mainstream media, this position articulates less easily with broader discourses of female passivity than does the anti-porn position.

⁹ In *Hard Core*, Linda Williams develops a ground-breaking analysis of the specifics of hard-core pornography, a related genre which foregrounds sexuality; in this case, the articulation of sexuality with violence is a slightly different incarnation of the suspense-thrillers I consider here, which combine suspense and violence with sexual titillation. See *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

intuitive consensus among feminists that such films are a simple and direct reflection of and incitation to violence against women — the sadistic male gaze rears its ugly head, once again.

In Men, Women, and Chainsaws, Carol Clover puts forth a dissenting voice. She seeks to qualify such assumptions about male spectatorship in what she terms "horror" (a loose category which includes a group of what I would call suspense films).

Conspicuously missing from this [Clover's] analysis is any reference to the male viewer's stake in the sadistic, voyeuristic side of horror — the pleasure he may take in watching, from some safe vantage or other, women screaming, crying, fleeing, cringing, and dying... I have no doubt that horror cinema offers such pleasures... I do not, however, believe that sadistic voyeurism is the first cause of horror. Nor do I believe that real-life women and feminist politics have been entirely well served by the astonishingly insistent claim that horror's satisfactions begin and end in sadism... If I err...on the side of complication, it is because I believe that the standard critique of horror as straight-forward sadistic misogyny itself needs not only a critical but a political interrogation.¹⁰

Within this thesis, I am interested not in the dynamics of spectatorship, but in the textual and discursive articulations of power within the particular cycle of films. In the general spirit of Clover's intervention, though, I take on the project of "complication": a political interrogation of the seemingly suspect category of female serial killers in suspense. Like Clover's work on horror film, and Linda Williams' analysis of hard-core pornographic film, I have chosen to address a feminist thread running through the intuitively "misogynist" genre of the suspense thriller. By focussing on the exceptional case of the "fatal femme," I seek to break down the complex gendered power dynamics within this particular cycle of the genre.

Examining these power dynamics in detail, is it possible that the tangled webs of violence, sexuality, pathology, and intrigue at the core of certain *film noir* offer moments of reversal and exception which challenge women's role as eternal victim? How is an

¹⁰ Carol J. Clover, Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) 18-19.

anti-feminist backlash or male anxiety around women's power projected into these paranoid filmic scenarios? To what extent can such disruptions be contained through conventional "happy family" closure — or through the violent death of the (anti-)heroine whose glittering image lingers on as the credits roll? Working against the inescapable grain of the "repressive rule" of female victimhood, I choose here to seize on the exceptional figure of the "fatal femme." While the exception may help define the rule, she also keeps alive the possibility, the inevitability, of transformation in gendered relations of power.

Methodology

In the second and complementary focus of this thesis, I seek to develop innovative tools of analysis suitable to the task at hand. Textual analysis as commonly practiced within auteurist or psychoanalytic film criticism offers a rigorous understanding of the film as an isolated text, but often fails to account for broader discursive fields — fields which move through the film but exceed the limits of any particular text or group of texts. On the other hand, a more empirical or "content analysis" approach may identify broad patterns, yet lacks the subtlety to decipher a particular text in all its complexity and contradiction. This thesis seeks to simultaneously address the specificity of filmic texts and generic textual systems, as well as the broader discursive formations of gender, violence, and power. To this end, I will combine the "immanent textual analysis" of one particular text (*Basic Instinct*) with the discursive analysis of a generically-linked cycle of films.

Textual Criticism

An important point of departure for the textual moment of this thesis is Roland Barthes' *S/Z*.¹¹ In this essay, often considered a breakthrough in post-structuralist literary criticism, Barthes develops a loving, detailed, and dense approach to criticism. The work grapples with the complex moments within a single text which necessarily exceed the boundaries of the page. Terry Eagleton describes the significance of the method employed in *S/Z* in the following manner.

The movement from structuralism to post-structuralism is in part, as Barthes himself has phrased it, a movement from "work" to "text." It is a shift from seeing the poem or novel as a closed entity, equipped with definite meanings which it is the critic's task to decipher, to seeing it as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning.¹²

In his dense analysis of Balzac's novella "Sarrasine," Barthes charts the narrative, hermeneutic, cultural, connotational, and symbolic codes working through the text. In this way, he is able to deal with structural aspects of the narrative as they are shot through with complex literary and cultural "codes." Barthes' great achievement here is to trace the multiple threads within the text, and to sketch out how they reference out to socio-discursive questions of sexuality, gender, and morality. In *S/Z*, Barthes shifts the focus of literary criticism from the text to the reader — from the closed modernist text to a productive and essentially intertextual one.¹³

The challenge in this thesis is to adapt Barthes' specifically literary sensibility into an approach pertinent to film criticism.¹⁴ In a sense, the "writerly" and productive

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

¹² Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 138.

¹³ Eagleton 138.

¹⁴ Julia Lesage attempted to use Barthes' method in a "microanalysis" of Renoir's *Rules of the Game*. The result is a rather literal and mechanistic application of Barthes' codes to cinema. Unfortunately, her project loses the spontaneity and richness of Barthes' evocative and productive interaction with "Sarrasine." See Julia Lesage, "S/Z and *The Rules of the Game*," *Movies and Methods Volume II*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 476-499.

criticism of S/Z is most applicable to written text. To develop a similarly dense and in-depth analysis for film is a considerably more arduous task, as the medium incorporates such a wide range of complexly interwoven cinematic and representational codes. Steven Shaviro's work has proved most helpful in broaching the formal gap from a literary to a cinematic text. His critique of psychoanalytic film theory, combined with a dense, writerly, and interactive account of the film *Blue Steel* (1990) inspired the possibility of my own "immanent" or tactile approach to film criticism.

According to Shaviro, the psychoanalytic tradition in film theory has eschewed visual pleasure as virtually reducible to ideology. Citing the examples of Metz's The Imaginary Signifier and Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," he argues that

film theory is written out of the tension between a desire to reproduce, and a desire to keep at a distance, the voyeuristic excitations that are its object. The problem with contemporary film theory is that the latter, reactive side has all too completely gained control. This theory still tends to equate passion, fascination, and enjoyment with mystification; it opposes to these a knowledge that is disengaged from affect, and irreducible to images.¹⁵

For Shaviro, this tendency within contemporary film theory has constructed the cinematic image within an economy of lack. According to Kaja Silverman, "film theory has been haunted since its inception by the specter of a loss at the center of cinematic production, a loss which both threatens and secures the viewing subject."¹⁶ As a challenge to the Lacanian account of the insubstantial "lack" of the cinematic image, Shaviro posits the plenitude and excess of the image, its "weird fullness." In the subsequent "immanent analysis" of *Basic Instinct* in Chapter 3, I work through Barthes' and Shaviro's conception of the fullness and productivity of the text.

¹⁵ Steven Shaviro, The Cinematic Body (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming, 1993) 15.

¹⁶ Cited in Shaviro 17.

Shaviro argues that in an attempt to unearth the "deeper truths" of filmic texts, psychoanalytic criticism has come to neglect the very *materiality* of film: the surface play of light, shadow, movement. For him, the film viewing experience is essentially immediate, dramatic, *pleasurable*. To capture this quality of film demands an approach which is grounded in part within the sensory immediacy of filmic experience (light play, editing, sound, suspense, resolution, the generic pleasure of repetition in genre: expectations satisfied). In the textual aspect of this thesis, I develop a playful approach which maintains an open-ended quality, allowing for indeterminacy and contradiction. Through the productivity of the writing process, I will address the immediacy of the film's "tactile" surface qualities as well as cultural and cinematic "codes" which move through the text. In the first part of Chapter 3, I will further delineate the form of the immanent analysis; the balance of the chapter is comprised of the detailed "immanent analysis" itself.

In spite of the absolute centrality of textual complexity to this thesis, textual criticism can tend to become trapped within the text. Both Barthes' analysis of "Sarrasine," and Shaviro's critique of *Blue Steel* exhibit a tendency to become enraptured with textual subtleties at the expense of a larger socio-discursive argument. In Shaviro's case particularly, this can lead to a politics of the aesthetic. According to his own argument, the "immediacy" of the theorist's filmic experience subsumes the possibility to theorize the text's socio-discursive significance: the result is an unqualified politics of pleasure.¹⁷

¹⁷ Shaviro's analysis of *Blue Steel*, while in some ways extremely insightful, lacks sensitivity to the problematic of women and violence. In his enthusiasm to reclaim Jamie Lee Curtis as a feminist hero, he overlooks the possible "corporeal" effects of the stalker theme in reinforcing a climate of fear for women viewers. Not to over-generalize this response (my own, in part), it still points out a flaw in an aesthetic strategy which is locked within the theorist's own viewing experience.

With its grounding in the discursive regularities of postmodern genre, my project seeks to avoid this trap. In the writing process, I chose to work the in-depth textual analysis of *Basic Instinct* through the notion of genre and the larger fatal femme cycle. The concept of contemporary *film noir* genericity furnishes a set of thematics (such as pathology, hermeneutics, morality, sexuality, and troubled gender relations) which overlap with the broader concerns of the thesis. In Chapter 2, I will sketch out the common formal elements of *film noir* (and this cycle in particular) against the ground of "New Hollywood" modes of production.

In the move from *Basic Instinct* as case study to the broader cycle of films, one common element is the ironic appropriation of *film noir* styles and themes. These themes (specifically the link between transgressive female sexuality, gendered power, and pathology) are produced through intertextual linkages, and through common points within the promotional materials. The strong generic and commercial cohesion of this cycle of films helps to anchor the immanent analysis *outside* the text in question. Through the complementary considerations of immanent analysis and genre, I position the complexities of *Basic Instinct* in relation to the rest of the cycle. Finally, from the cinematic focus of genre and "immanent analysis," I follow several evocative "lines of flight" outward into broader discursive analysis.

Discursive Analysis

Citing the example of Laura Mulvey's still-influential article of 1975, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Shaviro critiques a totalizing tendency of psychoanalytic feminist film theory.

In order to theorize the *systematic* nature of patriarchal representation, Mulvey cannot avoid importing into her own theoretical model the very norms that she wishes to destroy. She outlines a scenario of castration anxiety so all-encompassing that no form of narrative or visual enjoyment or engagement is exempt... The unintended effect of Mulvey's argument

is to foreclose whatever potentials for resistance and subversion, or Deleuzian "lines of flight," *are* latent within mainstream, narrative film.¹⁸

While Mulvey provides perhaps an all-too-easy target of critique some twenty years later, Shaviro's point is well taken that psychoanalytic film theory operates according to a repressive economy of power. In addition to the problem of pleasure and ideology in structuralist film criticism, the underlying "truths" of narrative and structure uncovered by this now-canonical approach have an uncomfortable tendency to reinforce psychoanalytic maxims of female passivity and male activity within film and audience systems. As the core of my project is to scrutinize the ways in which women are positioned as victims across the board — both in popular culture and in feminist theory — it becomes necessary to reassess the methodological tools offered by psychoanalysis.¹⁹ In the place of a hegemonic film theory which reinforces and actually *produces* norms of a male subject/ female object polarity, I choose to work here, like Shaviro, with the Deleuzian notion of "lines of flight."

Rather than proceed from an entrenched notion of the intrinsic gendered power dynamics of the cinematic gaze, I propose in my own immanent analysis to work *from the text outward* to examine specific instances of subversion and rupture. These instances occur within the film's formal structure, through elements of narrative and character, and in culturally-charged discursive fields of gender, sexuality, and power. In the two concluding chapters of the thesis, I will examine several of many possible lines of flight in relation to *Basic Instinct* and the broader cycle of films. These "lines of flight" include the representation of homosexuality and transgressive sexuality; irony and

¹⁸ Shaviro 14.

¹⁹ Although a full-scale study of this question is beyond the scope of this thesis, I do intend to address psychoanalysis obliquely here. Curiously, psychoanalytic discourses (and the powers of naming and claims of scientificity attached to them) circulate as recurring figures within this cycle of films. I will discuss this decentering and ironic play with psychoanalysis (as well as the politics of the gaze) in the two final chapters of the thesis.

postmodern genericity and their relation to "camp"; the gaze; psychoanalysis; and the figure of the fatal femme in relation to the problematic of violence against women.

These two chapters employ discourse analysis to examine the texts in relation to overlapping discursive fields of gender, sexuality, power, and violence. The method adopted here borrows from "discourse theory" generally, and more specifically from Foucault's "archival" method as applied to socio-historical problematics of sexuality, power, and knowledge. Foucault's specific notations about method are set out in The Archaeology of Knowledge²⁰ and L'ordre du discours.²¹ The discursive aspect of the analysis moves from the findings of the immanent analysis to consideration of the cycle in relation to shifting generic "regularities"; the discussion of genre and cycle is complemented by reference to related promotional and critical materials which accompany the films as part of the viewing context. The "corpus," then, is comprised of a body of related and overlapping "statements" produced within the films and their "commercial intertext."

Using Foucault's notion of gaps and regularities in discourse, I seek to pinpoint patterns or traces of recurring socio-discursive preoccupations within the corpus. A central "regularity," for example, is the widespread notion of violence against women in North American society. Yet the openness and fluidity of the discursive framework allows not only for single trends, but for moments of rupture and contradiction. The whole concept of the female serial killer is one such contradiction within this discursive field — a reversal which has proliferated dramatically of late in popular culture. Recurring tropes within the cycle of films (as well as the intricacies of *Basic Instinct*) suggest a complex nexus of culturally-charged discourses around gender, sexuality, violence and power.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

²¹ Michel Foucault, L'ordre du discours (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

Methodological Stakes

The hybrid method developed here was not conceived in abstraction, but has emerged from the multiple demands of the project at hand. I have adapted an immanent or "tactile" textual criticism as a partial response to the common tendency toward reductiveness and closed systems of analysis within psychoanalytic film criticism. The flexibility of the model allows both for an in-depth consideration of textual complexity, as well as constant movement through text, genre, and overarching discursive formations. The goal of this methodological innovation is to elaborate an approach which conserves the tension between the subtleties of textual systems and the traces of the larger (implicitly "political") discursive fields which flow through them.

The selection of *Basic Instinct* as the primary text of analysis is not coincidental. This film provides a highly-controversial and politically-charged point of departure for the analysis of women, violence, and power. The film's high profile and contested status among lesbian and gay activists makes it an excellent starting point for a politically-motivated discursive analysis. Also, the film's big budget, slick, and partially formulaic qualities (perceived as cheap and profiteering by film connoisseurs) suggest an additionally interesting case study. For the detail of the immanent analysis argues implicitly for an understanding of *all* cultural texts as complex, multi-accented cultural artifacts — even as Barthes' strategic selection of a seemingly "closed" modernist text in *S/Z* suggests the openness of all textual systems. This methodological plea for complexity in cultural criticism overlaps with the political stakes of the critique of Queer Nation "positive images" politics explored in Chapter 4. The double political and methodological poles of the thesis argue against reductive mobilizations of cultural texts in both theoretical and popular political arenas.

I have expressly chosen this cycle of fatal femme films as a troubling exception to prevalent cultural assumptions of female passivity. In connection to the broader socio-

discursive theme of "violence against women," I seek to retain consciousness of the undeniable "regularity" of women's victimhood while specifically addressing reversals and eruptions (or "lines of flight") in this pattern. This is a conscious choice to mobilize the productivity of theory to point out the politics — and the possibility — of the exception. Shaviro elaborates this position in relation to Deleuze and Guattari.

Deleuze and Guattari insist that social formations be defined not by their hegemonic institutions and ideologies but by their potentials for change, not by their norms but by their "lines of flight." Foucault argues much the same thing, when he says that unstable, mutable relations of force precede any fixed structures of domination and representation. No form of domination is ever final: every structure nourishes within itself the forces which potentially lead to its destruction. For Deleuze and Guattari, as for Foucault, the point of theory is to oppose the finality of deep structures, and to elicit and amplify the forces of potential change. Theory is neither a re-presentation of reality nor a critique of representation, but a new, affirmative construction of the real.²²

²² Shaviro 26.

CHAPTER 2: "NEW HOLLYWOOD" AND THE "FATAL FEMME" CYCLE

In The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault devotes considerable attention to "the formation of objects." He seeks "to substitute for the enigmatic treasure of "things" anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse."¹ While the archive of statements around gender, power, sexuality, and violence in contemporary society is vast and complex, the corpus selected for this thesis is grounded in the regularities of film and genre. Rather than begin with a topic or truth and apply it to discourse, I seek in this thesis to work from the striking "regularity" that emerges in a cycle of 1990s films featuring women killers. This historically-condensed and generically interconnected group of films forms the core of the corpus under investigation.

The cycle includes *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, *Final Analysis*, *Basic Instinct*, *Poison Ivy*, *Single White Female* (all released in 1992), *Body of Evidence*, *The Temp*, and *The Crush* (1993).² This cycle of films is circumscribed by a relatively brief time span, by shared thematic and stylistic elements related to the contemporary re-mobilization of *film noir* genre, and by common intertextual elements such as publicity formulas and star codes. In this chapter, I will examine the economic and aesthetic elements of contemporary cultural production (specifically, the "New Hollywood," and "postmodern genericity") which set the framework for the linkages of this cycle. Finally, against this more general backdrop, I will briefly describe the individual films in question.

¹ Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge (New York: Pantheon, 1972) 47-48.

² See the "Filmography" in the Appendix for production credits.

The New Hollywood

In his discussion of "The New Hollywood," Thomas Schatz describes the structural changes in post-World War II Hollywood film production. He argues that with the decline of the classical studio period, rapid technological innovation including the advent of television, and shifting demographics, Hollywood has been forced to seek new strategies to stay in business. One consistent tendency has been the development of the "movie blockbuster." According to Schatz, Spielberg's high-tech *Jaws* (1975) was the film that first exploited blockbuster production and publicity strategies on a contemporary grandiose scale. This project was followed by other momentous Spielberg/Lucas productions such as the *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* projects, and more recently, *Batman* (1989), *Terminator II* (1991), and currently, *Jurassic Park* (1993). For Schatz, from the mid-1970s onward this scale of production marked the consolidation of what he calls the "New Hollywood."

In one sense the mid-1970s ascent of the New Hollywood marks the studios' eventual coming-to-terms with an increasingly fragmented entertainment industry — with its demographics and target audiences, its diversified "multi-media" conglomerates, its global(ized) markets and new delivery systems.³

The "blockbuster" is further characterized by high-profile talent (stars and/or director), as well as increasingly elaborate and high-tech production values. Incorporating multiple media and commodity tie-ins and massive pre-release marketing, the blockbuster sets the "high end" of New Hollywood film production and distribution. Schatz suggests that since World War II, Hollywood has developed escalating and expensive marketing strategies around high-profile films; these films become "pre-sold spectacles," achieving an "event status" unto themselves.⁴ From *Jaws* onward, the

³ Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993) 9.

⁴ Schatz 16.

absolute promotional emphasis on the opening weekend has marked a consistent trend in current movie marketing, especially for blockbusters.

Jaws' nationwide release and concurrent ad campaign underscored the value of saturation booking and advertising, which placed increased importance on a film's box-office performance in its opening weeks of release. "Front-loading" the audience became a widespread marketing ploy, since it maximized a movie's event status while diminishing the potential damage done to weak pictures by negative reviews and poor word of mouth.⁵

Differing in some ways from the action/ adventure formula of blockbusters since *Jaws*, *Basic Instinct* nonetheless displays many of the elements of such a high-end product. The film offers major star appeal in Michael Douglas, as well as big name director Paul Verhoeven (*RoboCop* (1987) and *Total Recall* (1990)), as well as an extensive pre-release publicity campaign, and high production costs. With domestic box office profits well over \$53 million to date, *Basic Instinct* qualifies for heavyweight profit-making status. The film was the major TriStar release of the spring of 1992, and has enjoyed major international box office success and scandal. Its overall slick "look," as well as its explosive content of high-pitched sex tinged with danger and violence were doubtless carefully calculated for wide-spread market appeal. As I will argue in Chapter 4, the film's notoriety has been bolstered by the Queer Nation reprobation associated with the film. Without a doubt, the high-profile protests (which coincided with the opening weekend publicity push) helped single out *Basic Instinct* for "event status" across North America.

The economic success and political controversy surrounding *Basic Instinct*, actress Sharon Stone, and the film's articulation of sex and violence, continue to mark the film as a kind of watershed in recent Hollywood production. As Schatz suggests, the redefinition of cinematic ratings systems in 1968 paved the way for ever-increasing

⁵ Schatz 19.

levels of explicit sex and graphic violence in American film production. The Sharon Stone persona in *Basic Instinct*, along with Madonna's *Sex* project have recently embodied the pinnacle of 1990s risqué and explicit sexuality in popular media. As I will argue in Chapter 4, this cultural obsession of "speaking sex" has proved incomparably profitable. This cultural charge of sexuality linked with fear and violence is to some extent a component of all of the films I will be examining (and of the related female star vehicles).⁶

Leaving aside for the time-being the socio-discursive significance of these themes, *Basic Instinct* is, without a doubt, a class-A cinematic commodity. In fact, the film seems to represent a modification in the blockbuster formula: Relying more on critical and sensational controversy than on high-tech image and commodity tie-ins, the film has demonstrated "legs" with ongoing substantial domestic and international box-office appeal.⁷ Further, the film has spawned abundant magazine and television commentary, and continues to generate considerable revenue through home video rentals and pay tv movie channels.

In keeping with these trends, Schatz suggests that in the New Hollywood some of the distinctions between cinema and television media have blurred. For example, in the 1980s, the revenue for the major studios shifted away from theatrical circulation. In 1986, domestic box office accounted for only 28% of the studios' income, while 40% was provided by home video rental and pay-cable (in comparison to the 1978 figures of 54% and 4% respectively).⁸ The significance of these ratios plays into production goals, with many cinema-tv co-productions, as well as made-for-tv movies. If the blockbuster

⁶ Madonna's casting in *Body of Evidence* is the most obvious parallel to Stone in *Basic Instinct*, but the Drew Barrymore child seductress of *Poison Ivy* is also hyper-sexual and risqué.

⁷ In the context of the cycle and of the proliferation of "yuppie thrillers" generally (*Pacific Heights* (1990), *Unlawful Entry* (1992), *Sliver* (1993)) the film's success suggests a recent resurgence of *film noir* as a viable high-end product.

⁸ Schatz 25.

feature represents the high end of the scale, it carries with it a large volume of direct-to-video films, or films destined for a brief cinematic release, followed by video rental. Besides *Basic Instinct*, the careers of the other films of the cycle vary from lengthy box-office runs (*Single White Female*, *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*), to relatively swift appearances on video (*Poison Ivy*, *The Crush*, *The Temp*, and especially the bombed *Body of Evidence*).⁹

In his book *Genre*, Stephen Neale points out that the film commodity operates historically through the play of sameness and difference — the narrative and stylistic formulas of genre woven through individual permutations and transgressions of the rule.¹⁰ Classic *film noir* operates according to this principal, as does this contemporary cycle, which is linked through thematic and commercial regularities. These films are all thematically figured around centrally-figured “spider woman” characters framed in some version of the “thriller” genre — soaked in transgressive sexuality, violence, and the enigma of female pathology. Not merely a narrative formula, genre also operates as a key marketing strategy. In relation to common Hollywood production patterns, this “cloning” of a winning narrative hook is standard procedure. Schatz notes that difficult economic times (such as the current recession) call for “defensive market tactics, notably an increase in sequels, series, reissues, and remakes.”¹¹ This cycle of films fits this formula well, as the market is bombarded with variations of a single, explosive theme: the “battle of the sexes” filtered through sex, suspense, and violence.

⁹ In addition to these, there are a surprising number of comparable films which are direct video releases. I have chosen to work only with the films which circulated more commercially, as I am particularly interested in the “commercial intertext” which operates through marketing and reviewing processes. The broader circulation of these narratives, either on tv (notably no less than three versions of the “Long Island Lolita” tale, as well as *Black Widow Murders*) or on video (*Double Jeopardy* (1990) or *Doppelganger* (1992) with Drew Barrymore as psychotic twins) further demonstrates the astonishing prevalence of female murderers or serial murderers in contemporary popular culture.

¹⁰ Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 31.

¹¹ Schatz 21.

Neale further suggests that genre produces a set of expectations for film packaging and sales. Citing Leutrat, he suggests that "genre can be considered one single continuous text."¹² Within this logic, these films can be read as a cycle with significant points of commonality and individual variations. While a "high concept" film such as *Basic Instinct* has the latitude to transgress the boundaries of genre to some extent (making it a considerably more interesting object of analysis), the other films adhere more closely to the requirements of conventional Hollywood narrative — specifically, the destruction of transgressive females and restoration of the family unit.

The multi-mediated nature of contemporary North American cultural production inserts the New Hollywood high-end product such as *Basic Instinct* (and the other films in question) into what Eileen Meehan describes as a "commercial intertext."¹³ Components of this commercial intertext include advertising, Hollywood gossip, and popular criticism, which are examined here as integral aspects of this cycle of films. The promotional and critical practices which form the commercial intertext help produce what John Ellis calls the film's "narrative image."

The narrative image of a film is a complex phenomenon that occurs in a number of media: it is the film's circulation outside its performance in cinemas. It consists of the direct publicity created by the film's distributors and producers; the general public knowledge of the ingredients involved in the film (stars, brand identifications, generic qualities); and the more diffuse but equally vital ways in which the film enters into ordinary conversation and becomes the subject of news and of chat. The narrative image that appears through this network is a mass of references to other films and cultural phenomena...and a series of enigmas, of questions whose answer can (usually) be found in the film itself.¹⁴

One important aspect of narrative image is the film title, which helps establish genre and narrative "hook." Titles in the cycle typically include allusions to women,

¹² Neale 51.

¹³ Schatz 32.

¹⁴ John Ellis, Visible Fictions: cinema: television: video (revised edition) (New York: Routledge, 1992) 31.

sexuality, and crime. For example, the title "The Hand That Rocks the Cradle" evokes a common truism which asks to be completed with the phrase "rules the world." This title explicitly frames the film around motherhood and contemporary femininity, where the power struggle for children, mate, and hearth is fought between the "good" mother and the evil, childless nanny. Subtitle tags in advertising also contribute to narrative image. *The Temp* presents a telling example: "Don't get mad, get even."

The visual composition of publicity produces another key aspect of narrative image. Within the advertising for the films of this cycle, the unifying thematic and generic element of transgressive and threatening women figures forcefully. Visual publicity for most of these films foreground the visually dominating and threatening figure of the "fatal femme" in question. For example, in the movie poster/ ad for *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, a happy family snapshot is slashed through the middle by an image of "evil nanny" Rebecca DeMornay's face; in larger scale than the family photo, her face looms threatening and moody, semi-obscured in shadow. With its foregrounding of the threatening returned gaze of the "fatal femme" in question, this composition suggests another common advertising component which links the various films of the cycle in the commercial intertext: *Basic Instinct* publicity similarly frames Sharon Stone looking provocatively over Michael Douglas's shoulder; she stares directly into the camera, her long fingernails resting prominently against the exposed skin of his back. Also, *Single White Female* posters feature the faces of Bridget Fonda and Jennifer Jason Leigh (who, like DeMornay, peers threateningly from the shadows behind Fonda) dressed identically and both staring eerily into the camera. (These visual compositions introduces the important element of the threatening returned female gaze; I will examine the question of objectification and rupture in relation to the gendered gaze in Chapter 5.)

In a description of the historical packaging of Hollywood film, Neale writes: "Within the period of the studio system, certainly, profit was calculated not in relation to

individual films, but in relation to a particular time-span or within a particular cycle of production."¹⁵ Further, in reference to the studio era, Neale and Ellis concur that genre figures prominently in film marketing. Both of these tendencies follow in the New Hollywood as well: The fatal femme films function as a cycle of production within a particular type of generic framework. What differs, however, about the present moment in film production, are the particular "postmodern" accents within contemporary genericity.

Postmodern Genericity

Part of the aesthetic content of the commercial intertext is an increasing tendency toward appropriation of different generic and historical texts. This "postmodern pastiche" practice serves to rearticulate classic structures and themes of popular genres. Describing the terrain of contemporary genre, Jim Collins suggests that "the divergent, often conflicting ways in which recent narratives rearticulate the conventional structures of popular genres has become a distinguishable feature of contemporary textuality."¹⁶

The recycling of "classic" genres and cinematic moments has important resonances for this discussion of contemporary genre. Collins discusses one tendency within contemporary reworkings of genre, that of "hyperconscious eclecticism." Citing examples of hybrid genre rearticulations including *Back to the Future III* (1990), *Blue Velvet* (1986), and *Batman* (1989), he suggests that the current tendency toward a hybrid collage of various genres is not a practice simply emptied of cultural meaning (as suggested by some social critics). For Collins, these films represent a kind of "double referentiality" — involving both self-consciousness of the status of the image (an ironic or

¹⁵ Neale 52.

¹⁶ Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," Film Theory Goes to the Movies 256.

disturbing distanciation) and the production of new narrative forms with their own coherence.

While stakes and strategies may differ profoundly, they do have one thing in common — the recognition that the features of conventional genre films that are subjugated to such intensive rearticulation are not the mere detritus of exhausted cultures past: those icons, scenarios, visual conventions continue to carry with them some sort of cultural "charge" or resonance that must be reworked according to the exigencies of the present.¹⁷

Within this logic of postmodern genericity, the films of the cycle tend to hijack the "resonance" of the thriller genre, as well as some stylistic features of *film noir*. The bare bones of the plots tend to be structured around the double hermeneutic project of solving/ recounting a crime and of investigating the transgressive female at the root of it. However, when looking at the corpus of films there is a significant range of other generic elements woven in. Examples include pornography (*Basic Instinct*, *Body of Evidence*), melodrama (*Poison Ivy*, *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*), teen flicks (*The Crush*, *Poison Ivy*), horror/slasher film (*Basic Instinct*, *Single White Female*, *The Temp*), psychological drama (*Final Analysis*, *Basic Instinct*).

Collins stresses the specificity of postmodern genericity with its recycling of images and generic tropes from cinematic tradition: "The omnipresence of what Umberto Eco has called the "already said," now represented and recirculated as the "still-being-said.""¹⁸ For Collins, the significance of this cultural appropriation and replay is a heightened self-referentiality, an often ironic sensibility in the contemporary reworkings of generic formulas. Both at the level of cinematic quotation (for example, common visual references to Hitchcock in *Basic Instinct*) and at the level of the dramatic reworking of *film noir* themes, this cycle of films demonstrates varying elements of irony and self-consciousness.

¹⁷ Collins 256.

¹⁸ Collins 246.

On a fundamental level, the very insistence on reworking the *femme fatale* of *film noir* suggests a consistently sensationalist presentation. Both more explicitly sexual and more graphically violent than “classic” *film noir*, these films produce an ever-increasing pitch of suspense. Though seemingly in deadly earnest, these narratives nonetheless lapse into moments of absurdity and/or irony. As I will argue in Chapter 4, the figure of the blonde nymphomaniac-slash-slasher holds a peculiarly “fabricated” quality in tension with prevalent discourses of violence against women — and with more general codes of representation which tend to depict women as victims. Further, the condensed production of these anti-heroines within the early 1990s time-frame heightens the sense of thematic saturation.

Ironical deployments vary from film to film. In the discussion of “Queer Representation,” I will examine the highly-ironic and “open” quality of *Basic Instinct*. For Schatz, such textual openness is characteristic of New Hollywood textuality.

The vertical integration of classical Hollywood, which ensured a closed industrial system and coherent narrative, has given way to “horizontal integration” of the New Hollywood’s tightly diversified media conglomerates, which favours texts strategically “open” to multiple readings and multimedia reiteration.¹⁹

In the case of *Basic Instinct* and the other films of the cycle, this high degree of multi-media reiteration is a key textual component. For example, the immanent analysis of *Basic Instinct* in the next chapter focuses to a considerable extent on what I term “multi-media moments” — segments which are replayed in trailers and other fragmented forms as semi-autonomous media events. While carrying a cultural resonance of their own, these scenes and images help produce Ellis’ “narrative image.” Yet Schatz’s optimistic evocation of some blanket “postmodern textual openness to multiple readings” lacks critical precision.

¹⁹ Schatz 34.

In "The Discipline of Forms: Mannerism in Recent Cinema," Will Straw takes a closer look at the phenomenon of appropriation in recent cinema. According to Straw, a theoretical account of appropriation "remains underdeveloped within film studies, despite the centrality of these procedures to a wide range of film-making practices in recent years."²⁰ Straw critiques a common tendency to theorize postmodern texts as "dispersed and fragmentary collages" which, as in Schatz, are designated as almost infinitely open to various readings. Rather, Straw suggests that postmodern texts bridge a tension between dispersion and the rigid re-deployment of stringent narrative and generic codes.

The appropriation of stylistic and compositional elements within postmodern filmic practices takes place in a tenuous space between two forces working to bring about closure. One of these is...the limited cultural horizon which is the source of appropriated elements. This is not the boundary-less terrain of the exterior culture in its totality, but the specific set of references which a text establishes. The other is the gravitational pull of narrative and generic structures which hold the appropriated elements within a particular order or logic. The resurgence of the highly oedipalized narrative patterns of *film noir* in films such as *Mona Lisa* (1985)...can be seen at one level as rooted in an activity of grounding which logically precedes any number of other stylistic exercises.²¹

In keeping with Straw's argument, there is some ironic and intertextual play and intermingling of genres within this cycle. Yet the basic scenario within this cycle of films is relatively stable — an individual or family life disrupted by a fascinating, sexy, and ultimately pathological woman from the outside. Resolutions to this conflict range between two extremes. At times, the interloper is gruesomely eliminated in a terrifying climax; in the other extreme, she lives to repeat the terrifying scenario. I will return to the question of generic frameworks and containment (as well as moments of intensity and rupture) in Chapters 4 and 5.

²⁰ Will Straw, "The discipline of forms: mannerism in recent cinema," Cultural Studies 1.3 (1987): 361-62.

²¹ Straw 371.

The challenge for this thesis is to address both the fairly-rigid generic narrative configurations within the cycle, as well as the gaps, reversals, and specificities of particular texts. I maintain this tension through considering the case study of a dense and layered "immanent analysis" of *Basic Instinct* in relation to the generic regularities and fluctuations within the cycle of films. Through the figure of the female serial killer, the cycle condenses a troubling and conflicted articulation of gender and violence. This complex figure threatens the comfortable socio-cultural conventions which favour women as nurturing wives and mothers. A notable and intriguing "exception," *Basic Instinct* offers an interesting case study. Both an integral part of the cycle, the film is nonetheless set apart by its status as a high-profile and high-end product, its pronounced ironic sensibility, and its hyperbolic deployment of a veritable coven of "fatal femmes."

"Fatal Femmes": Thematic Regularities and Exceptions

The central thematic element which binds this cycle together is the "fatal femme" character. Within these texts, the *femme fatale* of classic *film noir* is filtered through contemporary postmodern cultural trends and the exigencies of New Hollywood production. In order to suggest the ironic and recycled aspects of these contemporary anti-heroines, I have chosen to replace the term *femme fatale* (a figure in some ways specific to classic *film noir*) with the designation of "fatal femme." This shift in terms indicates both the partially self-conscious quality of these contemporary characters, as well as their heightened and more literal violent tendencies.

As Place and Krutnik suggest, classic *film noir* is centrally figured around problematic and threatening gender relations (threatening at least for men) —

particularly strong, overtly-sexual women.²² Traditionally, this problematization of family and gender relations was focused in the *femme fatale* figure. Janey Place recounts how what she terms the "spider woman" figure haunts both *film noir*, and Western culture more generally.

The dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction is among the oldest themes of art, literature, mythology and religion in Western culture. She is as old as Eve, and as current as today's movies, comic books and dime novels. She and her sister (or *alter ego*), the virgin, the mother, the innocent, the redeemer, form the two poles of female archetypes.²³

In this cycle of films, the "spider woman" character is revitalized in a contemporary context as the "liberated career woman" spawned by the second wave of feminism. Teresa Russell's serial murders of wealthy older husbands in *Black Widow* (1987), and Glenn Close's murderous "other woman scorned" of *Fatal Attraction* (1989) are examples of the 1980s fatal femme. Clearly, the *femme fatale*/ fatal femme is a resilient cultural icon. However, what is most striking about this recent cycle is its historically-condensed, "over the top," and highly-popular re-deployment of these characters.

The contemporary settings of these films favour the career woman theme. While the earlier *femme fatale* lived vicariously through a man, the contemporary character is highly autonomous. Her independence is marked through her resistance to family values, and a promiscuous, "transgressive" sexuality (framed in *Basic Instinct*, *The Temp*, and *Body of Evidence* as "callous" "cold," and, ironically, "male"). Significantly,

²² Place and other theorists in E. Ann Kaplan's *Women in Film Noir* suggest that this obsession with women's power is related in some measure to more general post-war adjustments in European and North American gender roles — specifically a need to contain the economic and social independence gained by women during World War II. A similar argument could be suggested here in relation to the current cycle of films and "post-feminist" gender malaise. See Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: film noir, genre, masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991); and Janey Place, "Women in film noir," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 35-67.

²³ Place 35.

these women's intransigence is also expressed through economic and career status. The script of *Basic Instinct* makes much of the fact that Catherine Tramell graduated *magna cum laudae* from Berkeley with double honours in psychology and literature; not only a multi-millionaire through inheritance, she is also a best-selling novelist. In *The Temp*, Lara Flynn Boyle is terrifyingly efficient — the quintessential secretary who sets out to eclipse her boss (nice-guy Timothy Hutton) and run the place. In *The Crush*, Alicia Silverstone plays a convincing 15-year-old nymphomaniac who is also a child genius — a spoiled rich kid who plays piano to rival Glenn Gould, and owns her own horse.

In her popular book Backlash, Susan Faludi frames such roles within a broader cultural anti-feminist backlash: "In Hollywood films, of which *Fatal Attraction* is only the most famous, emancipated women with condominiums of their own slink wild-eyed between bare walls, paying for their liberty with an empty bed, a barren womb."²⁴ She links this media stereotype of the psychotic, unfulfilled career woman with parallel American public discourses around popular psychology, economic policies, electoral politics, the rise of the New Right, and battles over reproductive rights. Although Faludi tends to make sweeping generalizations, her book sketches out some important aspects of the contemporary socio-political context in the U.S. Such "anti-feminist backlashes" commonly pathologize the contemporary career woman; for Faludi, films like *Fatal Attraction* push the point to the extreme by rendering her violent and sexually suspect.

While clearly linked to the 1940s *femme fatale* figure, these contemporary "fatal femmes" seem to literalize the earlier thematic linking of autonomous female sexuality with pathology and violence. As Schatz points out, the sexual innuendo of the Hayes Code era has since 1968 been replaced by increasing levels of graphic violence and explicit sexuality.²⁵ *Gilda's* seductive cabaret numbers have been superseded by the

²⁴ Susan Faludi, introduction, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (New York: Doubleday, 1991) xi.

²⁵ Schatz 15.

steamy sex scenes in *Basic Instinct* and *Body of Evidence*. Similarly, in current thrillers, the off-camera scuffles in 1940s *film noir* have been replaced by an increasingly "over-the-top" frenzy of graphic violence. The contemporary fatal femme partakes to some extent in these shifts as well.

The lowered duplicitous eyelashes and elaborate conspiracies with male lovers of the 1940s (for example in *Double Indemnity* (1944) or *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946)²⁶) have been replaced by a much more direct fatal femme of the 1990s. If the earlier *femme fatale* "tempted man to bring about his destruction," the 1990s fatal femme takes matters into her own hands — sometimes in on-screen hand-to-hand combat.²⁷ Studio era innuendo and necessary indirectness of dialogue and editing are now replaced by superimpositions of pornographic and "slasher" genres. While these women still wield their feminine wiles, they are also quite handy with an ice pick or knife at close quarters (*Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct*), blunt objects (*The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, *The Crush*), guns (*The Temp*, *Final Analysis*), and generally in staging elaborate "accidents" (*Poison Ivy*, *The Crush*, *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*). *Body of Evidence* pushes the "murderous woman" analogy to its logical point of absurdity, where the woman literally "fucks men to death."

In addition to her more overtly violent nature, the current fatal femme often targets other women as rivals. If the earlier *femme fatale* was a loner in a man's gritty *film noir* world, the contemporary figure increasingly invades the sanctum of home and family. Within the present cycle, victims are democratically divided between men and

²⁶ The distinction between 1940s-style narratives and the graphic sexual and violence content of contemporary film is well illustrated by the difference between the 1946 and 1981 versions of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The same is true of *Cape Fear* where the psychological buildup of the 1962 version is made explicitly sexual, perverse and extremely violent in 1991.

²⁷ Over the past 25 years, fighting women figures, both good and evil, have proliferated on screen in step with the second wave of North American feminism. Most recently, these tough women were prominently featured in the 1991 films *Thelma and Louise*, *Terminator II*, and *La Femme Nikita*, as well as the 1993 American remake, *Point of No Return*, and *Lethal Weapon 3* (1992). See Kathi Maio, "Film: Women Who Murder for the Man" *Ms. Magazine* 2.3 (1991): 82-84.

women. Citing some of these elements of female pathology, Faludi slams *Fatal Attraction* — in some ways the prototype of many of the female slasher films to follow.

[Anti-feminist] backlash shaped much of Hollywood's portrayal of women in the '80s. In typical themes, women were set against women; women's anger at their social circumstances was depoliticized and displayed as personal depression instead; and women's lives were framed as morality tales in which the "good mother" wins and the independent woman gets punished.²⁸

Faludi describes these narratives in unequivocally negative terms. While she suggests that they work from the threat of increased female power, she finds no redeeming qualities whatsoever in a film like *Fatal Attraction*. By working through the regularities and variations within the cycle and particularly in *Basic Instinct*, I will seek in this thesis to explore the complexities of the fatal femme figure — while still retaining cognizance of the important element of "backlash" operative in these films. I will return to this question at some length in the final chapter.

Convergent Cycles: "Final Girls" and "Yuppie Thrillers"

In this discussion of the generic features of this cycle of films, I have sketched out some regularities of form and narrative content. However, before describing the individual films of the cycle, it is important to consider another cycle of thrillers which is intrinsically connected to the overarching discursive fields of gender, power, and violence. This other cycle also presents a female protagonist, a threatened heroine who in this case is terrorized throughout the film by a male stalker; ultimately, though, when failed by the stock male rescue scenario, she manages to defeat her attacker in a hair-raising climax. Carol Clover suggests that this scenario is actually the modern "A" movie incarnation of 1960s and 1970s exploitation films. In these slasher flicks, after a rampage of murders, the "final girl" (for instance, Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween* (1978))

²⁸ Faludi 113.

confronts and defeats her attacker. In the Afterword of Men, Women, and Chainsaws, Clover muses that

themes and formulas that had emerged and flourished in the exploitation underbrush migrated into higher forms — including the glossiest blockbusters of 1990-91. [These include] films like *Sleeping with the Enemy* (in which a woman is tracked by a psycho husband), *Blue Steel* (in which a woman detective, played by Jamie Lee Curtis, becomes enmeshed with a psycho lover), *Pacific Heights* (in which a landlady is tormented by a psycho tenant), and *Silence of the Lambs* (in which a woman FBI agent solicits help from one psychokiller in tracking down another).²⁹

Interestingly, this cycle has developed in a parallel time-frame with the women psycho-killer films considered in this thesis. After the films listed by Clover, a whole series of lookalikes appeared in 1992, including *A Kiss Before Dying*, *After Dark My Sweet*, *Love Crimes*, *Deadbolt*, *Deceived*, *Dead Again*, *Whispers in the Dark* — and in 1993, *Jennifer 8*, *Sliver*, and *Guilty As Sin*. Framed from the perspective of the female protagonist, these films present women as terrorized victims who nonetheless prevail in the end. Like the fatal femme cycle, these women also tend to be independent women. Both cycles are preoccupied with the figure of the independent career woman and her relationship to men, power, success and safety in both public and private spheres.

At times, the roles of female stalkers and "final girls" overlap within certain films which pit the one prototype against the other. In *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* and *Single White Female*, Annabella Sciorra and Bridget Fonda respectively are left to fend for themselves against female attackers. All of the films of the female killer cycle (with the notable exceptions of *Basic Instinct* and *Final Analysis*) feature a "good" female love interest for the male hero as counterpoint to the evil fatal femme seductress. These two types of roles are further connected through the "commercial intertext" of star codes. As thriller films are currently a popular genre commonly concerned with women, they

²⁹ Carol Clover, Men, Women, and Chainsaws (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) 232.

provide many of the roles available to Hollywood actresses. For example, Jennifer Jason Leigh moved from the girl cop in crossover thriller/ police drama *Rush* to the "roommate from hell" in *Single White Female*. Bridget Fonda progressed from the harassed roommate of *Single White Female* to the gun-toting agent in *Point of No Return* (1993). Similarly, Sean Young plays the threatened heroine in both *A Kiss Before Dying* and *Love Crimes*. Finally, Sharon Stone made her name as the ultimate female serial killer Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*; in her much-awaited subsequent role, she plays the spied-upon, "stalked" heroine of *Sliver* (1993).

The two cycles also overlap through recurring narrative scenarios. In some cases, the films present the exact replica of an earlier scenario, merely switching gender roles. Examples include *Deadbolt*, a "clone" of *Single White Female*, differing only in the gender of the obsessive and violent roommate. Similarly, Matt Dillon's standard male murderer who preys upon his girlfriends in *A Kiss Before Dying* (1991) becomes the fatal femme in *Basic Instinct* and *Final Analysis*. The always-popular courtroom drama flip flops historically through the 1980s and 1990s from the female lawyer defending a possible multiple murderer in *Physical Evidence* (1989), to the reverse scenario in *Body of Evidence*, and back to Rebecca DeMornay's terrified lawyer in *Guilty as Sin* (1993).

The convergences between these two cycles extend even beyond narrative and star codes. These films are stylistically and thematically linked to a particular 1980s and 1990s "yuppie" sensibility which intersects with a more general shift in the setting and narrative preoccupations of recent thrillers. The sordid, gritty, inner city settings with their population of hard-boiled cops, prostitutes, and drug addicts of the 1970s (such as in the 1971 *Klute*) have been replaced in part by the anxieties of middle class suburban coupledness as in *Unlawful Entry* (1992) or *Pacific Heights* (1989). The comfortable, spacious homes and offices of the "yuppie thriller" are an index of *noir* anxiety of a different order. If formerly the threats of societal decay were played out in the inner city

neighbourhoods, in the mid-1980s these forces invaded the inner sanctum of middle class comfort.

The characters and their concerns within these thrillers further underline this pristine and hermetic tendency in recent thrillers. Faludi rightly points out the tendency for independent career women (as in *Fatal Attraction*) to be singled out and punished as dysfunctional. Yet scanning the field of recent thrillers, there appears a common thread of instability running through yuppiedom generally. For example, these seemingly solvent two income families live precariously beyond their means (*Pacific Heights* and *Unlawful Entry*); their seemingly picture-perfect families and love lives are unravelling (*The Temp*; *Poison Ivy*); and the morality of the "professional" (*The Temp*) or the authority figure (*Internal Affairs* (1990); *Basic Instinct*; *Jennifer 8*) are sorely problematized.

Besides sharing common income brackets, lifestyles, and values, the characters in most contemporary thrillers are almost uniformly white. These films present an astonishing homogeneity in relation to the contested and central role of race in contemporary American society. While blacks and hispanics make brief appearances as petty thieves, maids, delivery people, colourful background action, and supporting characters, the "real" dramas are played out amongst the white professionals. By bracketing off racial difference, the films put forth a polite silence, a discursive gap, around contentious issues of race. Deviance and blame are instead to be found within the upper middle class professional set. Often, as within the cycle in question, the source of the *noir* disequilibrium is rooted in aberrant females, in dysfunctional sexuality, or in problematic male-female relations.

While my interest here is in female serial killer narratives, it is important to sketch in broader contemporary thriller trends to provide a more coherent historical context. The "final girl" and fatal femme cycles operate in relation to this recent generic shift toward

the "yuppie thriller." This overlap of narrative, genre, and stars indicates significant convergences in these films around troubled gender relations, power, and sexuality. Figured specifically around issues of female agency and violence, the two scenarios posit similar "stalker" plot-lines which simply reverse the genders of predator and prey. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, each of these two extremes ("the final girl" and the fatal femme) functions to define the other.

Within this context, the figure of the male psychopath/ stalker is historically considerably more resilient than the female murderer; this is true both in popular representation generally, and in the realm of the social. What is interesting about these recent fatal femme films, however, is that they represent a dramatic thematic reversal to common cultural patterns which regularly frame women as nurturing mothers and/or passive victims. It is for this reason that I have selected this cycle as an object of inquiry: The exceptions to the rule mapped out in this cycle of films can help provide important insights into broader public discourses around women's powers in contemporary society. In the following section, I will briefly describe each of the individual films which comprise the fatal femme cycle.

The Films of the Cycle

***Basic Instinct* (1992)**

Big name Dutch director Paul Verhoeven skillfully deploys the sure-sell suspenseful combination of risqué sex and violence in *Basic Instinct*. The blonde murderess' *modus operandus* and quirky proclivities (if not her identity) are set up in the opening scene where she "fucks," ties up, and viciously stabs of a man in bed. From the film's first moments, coitus and orgasm are linked inextricably with violent death. Enter: "hard-boiled detective" Nick Curran (Michael Douglas) and good-natured sidekick partner Gus (George Dzundza).

From the start, the investigation is tinged with intrigue and corruption with the high-powered intervention of the mayor's office. The case offers few leads except the victim's gorgeous and supercilious millionaire girlfriend, Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone). Soon the police learn that bestselling author Tramell has recently published a novel about a retired rock 'n roll star who, like the actual victim, is murdered in bed with an icepick — by his girlfriend. Psychiatric experts proclaim that either Tramell is the murderer who intended the book as an alibi, or that someone else has set out to incriminate the author.

As Nick and Gus seek out Tramell, she constantly outsmarts them, meanwhile developing a perverse interest in Curran. As the primary suspect and object of desire, the hermeneutic quest of the film is to uncover the "truth on Tramell." It seems that she has a penchant for writing murder stories which echo real life occurrences (including with the "accidental" deaths of her parents). To add fuel to the flame, Tramell is sexually provocative at every turn; she even has a butch girlfriend named Roxy (Leilani Sarelle). However, as the plot progresses, the half-truths revealed about Tramell lead to nothing conclusive. And, increasingly, the spotlight is turned on Detective Curran's shady past. Nick's unsavory police record (the accidental shooting of two tourists) and his addictions to cocaine and alcohol, have prompted mandatory counselling with police psychiatrist Dr. Beth Garner (Jeanne Tripplehorn). After a brief affair with his counsellor, Nick begins to suspect that she has sold his personal file to someone who is out to get him.

Meanwhile, Nick is drawn further into Catherine's tantalizing and provocative web of sex and danger. She frankly admits that she is using him for the prototype of the detective character in her next book, a man who eventually "falls for the wrong woman." Gradually, the "play within a play" and the plotline converge, as Catherine seems to be stalking Nick. Verhoeven punctuates the film with sex scenes which are echoes of the

opening scene; these repeated sequences set up the expectation that Catherine will eventually kill Nick in the throes of passion — just as she did her former lover.

As the complex plot winds in on itself, Nick and Gus discover confusing links amongst the women around them. Their investigation reveals that the psychiatrist Beth and Catherine have some sort of obsessive connection dating back to their college days. Eventually it seems that Beth, Catherine, and Roxy, as well as Catherine's friend Hazel (Dorothy Malone) all have the shadow of murder and multiple murder hanging over them. In addition, the three younger women are all bisexual or lesbian.

As the film draws to a close, the death toll rises with Roxy's demise in a jealous car chase with Nick, the foreshadowed stabbing of Nick's partner Gus, and the shooting of Beth who is seemingly responsible for some of the carnage. With most of the main characters killed off and Catherine still under suspicion, the film ends with the smitten Nick convincing himself of her innocence. In classic bookend style, the final sequence has Nick and Catherine in bed; as in the opening scene, she reaches repeatedly for something. A final shot reveals the inevitable icepick glittering evil and patient under the bed. The icepick both cements Catherine's guilt, and suggests that she may yet finish Nick. This fickle ending eludes conventional closure or neat solutions, pointing rather to a sequel.

***Final Analysis* (1992)**

In *Final Analysis*, a successful do-gooder shrink (Richard Gere) offers solace and solutions to his many clients. At the pinnacle of his career, he has all the answers — until he tangles with two blonde sisters. When the troubled "ugly duckling" younger sister (Uma Thurman) comes to see him, she recounts a disturbing dream which seems to suggest childhood trauma or abuse; she repeats this dream several times throughout the film, but can never remember the dream's outcome. Soon Gere encounters Thurman's

older "hot" sister (Kim Basinger), who seduces him. Shortly thereafter, she tells him she is married to a violent and jealous mobster. When Basinger offs her husband under suspicious circumstances, the infatuated Gere gets her off through his high-powered lawyer friend, and by testifying on her behalf as an "expert" witness. Eventually Gere realizes that his girlfriend has been lying, and seeks to investigate her. The film peaks with a chase in a lighthouse (highly reminiscent of the tower in the 1958 *Vertigo*), where Basinger falls to her death in the crashing waves below. While Gere eventually bests Basinger, he discovers that he was set up from the beginning. Thurman points out to him that her bad dream was actually an obscure case lifted from the pages of Freud. In a completion of the "evil sisters" theme, the film ends on Thurman seducing her next rich male victim, effectively taking Basinger's place.

This film is integrally concerned with the knowledge-power discourse of psychoanalysis. It plays liberally with psychoanalytic tropes such as dreams, the melded ego boundaries of the two "twinned" sisters, and the problematic theme of childhood sexual abuse. Ultimately, though, Gere's comfortable status as analyst is turned against him. I will return to this point in the discussions of psychoanalysis in Chapters 4 and 5.

***The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992)**

As the title suggests, "the hand that rocks the cradle...rules the world." This film chronicles the attempted takeover of "blissful" motherhood and wifedom by yet another blonde psychopath (Rebecca DeMornay). The film opens with good mother Annabella Sciorra being molested by her gynecologist during a routine internal examination (a scene reminiscent of Jeremy Irons' creepy philandering twin gynecologists in Cronenberg's 1988 *Dead Ringers*). Sciorra's subsequent complaint spurs other reports, and the doctor shoots himself. When his wife (Rebecca DeMornay) hears the news, she faints and miscarries the baby she is carrying. Abandoned and shunned, without

insurance or family, DeMornay blames Sciorra for her misfortune, and swears revenge. In this weird twist on the "final girl" revenge scenario, DeMornay's "victim" status is transformed swiftly into fatal femme pathology.

DeMornay promptly gets herself hired as nanny for the two children of Sciorra and husband (Matt McCoy). The new nanny soon proves herself invaluable, and begins bit by bit to replace and outdo Sciorra at every turn. Sneakily, she also begins to sabotage Sciorra's relationship with her husband and friends. When Sciorra's best friend begins to suspect, DeMornay sets up a nasty accident where the friend is felled by a falling glass panel in Sciorra's greenhouse. All of the escalating conflict occurs, significantly, when Sciorra's husband is out at the office, and Sciorra's only ally is George, a mentally-retarded black handyman hired to build a new fence; when he takes a dislike to her, DeMornay manages to have him dismissed. Eventually, George returns in the nick of time, with Sciorra immobilized (her asthma medication hidden by DeMornay). As the horrified children look on, DeMornay fells the handyman, and Sciorra rises, seemingly from the dead, to push the interloper out the attic window. She falls on the new fence outside, and is impaled by a wooden picket fence post.

The plot-line of *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* is strikingly reminiscent of *Fatal Attraction* (1987). According to Faludi, the scenario of the crazed, barren, single female invading home and hearth holds a certain "backlash" resonance. Ultimately, this film begins and ends with the happy yuppie suburban couple, an institution which is able to withstand the Threat from Outside. DeMornay, for all her wiles, never gets to first base with the faithful husband, and is skewered (highly reminiscent of a ritualistic vampire killing) for her sins.

***Poison Ivy* (1992)**

Poison Ivy is constructed around a lonely, sleazy teenager (blonde, voluptuous, and pouting Drew Barrymore³⁰) who is taken in by a rich family. The film commences with Barrymore, the new girl at school, making friends with intellectual nerd rich kid (Sara Gilbert, of the hit tv sitcom *Roseanne*). Soon the two become inseparable, and the rootless Barrymore is informally adopted into Gilbert's family. The polymorphously perverse Barrymore exudes sexual vibes throughout, and there is a hint of a teenage passion about the friendship. Yet Barrymore quickly moves beyond child's play, seeming to encroach on Gilbert's place in the affections of her estranged and sickly mother (Cheryl Ladd), and even her dog. This subtle, manipulative takeover, where the interloper begins to "replace" the sympathetic female character recurs in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, and *Single White Female*. The Freudian trope of "immature love" between the girls is tinged with the classic accompanying loss of ego boundaries. But the oedipal narrative gets even better.

Gradually Barrymore moves beyond mindgames, as she pushes the sickly mother out the window — a kind of euthanasia, paralleled with her summary execution of an injured dog at the beginning of the film. Killing off the mother, this errant daughter moves on to seduce the father (Tom Skerritt). When Gilbert begins to suspect her friend's role in her mother's "suicide," Barrymore tries to stage a car accident. Eventually, the two girls fight it out in hand-to-hand combat, and Barrymore falls gracefully to her death out Gilbert's mother's bedroom window.

³⁰ Around the time of the release of the film, Drew Barrymore appeared nude on the cover of *Interview* magazine (July, 1992). Inside, she poses making out with her boyfriend on a picnic table; she also poses nude in several homoerotic photos with nude female models. This type of explicit "transgressive sexuality" is part of Barrymore's "naughty" image in the film — and a common element in the promotional framing of the other "fatal femme" stars.

***Single White Female* (1992)**

Directed by Barbet Schroeder, *Single White Female* works on a variation of the adolescent crush theme. Good girl Bridget Fonda is a successful young computer/fashion consultant in the process of setting up her own business. Having recently kicked out her boyfriend for fooling around on her, she is another "single white female" left living alone in dangerous New York City. She places an ad in the newspaper which reads "Single white female seeks roommate..." After many applicants, the dowdy-but-endearing Jennifer Jason Leigh appears. At first she proves to be the ideal, thoughtful roommate, and the two girls become close friends, sharing clothes and meals. Gradually, the unkempt Leigh seems to take on Fonda's trendy appearance, donning her clothes and an identical hairstyle. This scenario of "young women's bonding gone beserk" is like the Beth/Catherine connection in *Basic Instinct*. Initially helpful and retiring to an absurd degree, Leigh eventually begins to sabotage Fonda's business and her reconciliation with her boyfriend. Leigh's attachment to Fonda becomes a near obsession which turns sour when Fonda's boyfriend returns.

The film gets ugly when Leigh, posing as Fonda, sneaks in on Fonda's sleeping boyfriend and seduces him before he recognizes her. When he tries to throw her out, she throws her (Fonda's) spiked heel shoe at him, which impales his eye and kills him. After this, Leigh becomes more and more possessive, and eventually imprisons Fonda in her own apartment. In a bizarre quasi-lesbian infatuation, she ties Fonda up, then alternately caresses her and threatens her with a knife. When Fonda frees herself, they battle for some time in a bloody "horror" climax reminiscent of *Fatal Attraction*. Finally, Fonda bests Leigh and the film ends abruptly.

Single White Female is an interesting "morality tale" which chronicles the dangers faced by the single woman in the city. The bizarre twist to this common scenario is that the threat is posed not by a man, but by a young woman. Linking up with the

impersonation/ female twinning themes of *Poision Ivy*, *Basic Instinct*, *Final Analysis*, and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, the film's closing scenes produces in Leigh a violent female monster reminiscent of horror film villains.

***Body of Evidence* (1993)**

This film, which saw a very brief cinematic release, was a Madonna vehicle from start to finish. Released in January, 1993, *Body of Evidence* is in many ways a remake of *Basic Instinct*. The film opens on an S/M sex scene with Madonna and an older man. At the end of the session, he dies tied up on the bed, watching a video of her masturbating. The rest of the film is structured around a trial to determine whether Madonna can be held responsible for the murder of this wealthy elderly man with a heart problem — who happens to have willed her his considerable fortune. Enter: Willem Dafoe.

Madonna convinces "nice," conventional family man/ lawyer Dafoe to take her case. Gradually, she seduces him and initiates him in the rites of bondage, hot wax, etc. After some steamy sex scenes and Dafoe's resulting separation from his wife and child, he figures out she *is* guilty, and that he's been "had." (Much like Gere in *Final Analysis*, the well-meaning professional man is duped by the fatal femme — nearly losing everything.) Even after he gets her released, he is convinced that she is guilty of consistently "over-exerting" older wealthy male lovers with heart trouble in order to inherit their money. (This is a version of the common "black widow" scenario). When Dafoe goes to Madonna's houseboat/ sex den to confront her, he finds her with a jealous lover/ conspirator. As she unceremoniously announces that she never cared for either of them, the co-conspirator shoots her down, and she tumbles out the window to the dirty water below.

***The Temp* (1993)**

"The Temp" (Lara Flynn Boyle, of *Twin Peaks* fame) is a power-hungry, family-less, castrating bitch. This frighteningly-efficient assistant sets out to please her advertising executive boss (Timothy Hutton) — and eventually to surpass him. Set in a cookie-making firm, *The Temp* starts with a comical lilt, but becomes increasingly dire. In the now-familiar scenario, Boyle arrives handily on the scene to set Hutton's desk in order when his regular (male) secretary goes on maternity leave. Beginning as the ideal help-mate, she soon grabs credit for all their common work, and nearly upsets Hutton's place in the firm. Meanshile, she also attempts to seduce the workaholic Hutton, who is estranged from his wife; when this fails, she tries to mess up his marital reconciliation. As in *Single White Female* and *The Crush*, many of the temp's manipulations and invasions of privacy consist of jumbled phone messages or unauthorized computer access.

Boyle soon gets in the good books of the hard-assed, post-feminist lesbian company boss (Faye Dunaway), who likes her direct style. With Boyle's ascent in the company executive, Hutton becomes increasingly suspicious about two convenient "accidental" deaths among the competition. Unsure of Boyle's involvement, he accompanies her to oversee an emergency in a far-off cookie factory. There they encounter Dunaway, and a nasty struggle ensues. Dunaway is killed, and somehow Boyle comes out smelling like roses. In an unexpected twist, however, it is Hutton, and not Boyle, who is promoted in the end as the new company boss. His first act in this position is to fire Boyle, which he executes with some satisfaction.

The Temp is a variation on the "career woman" theme. While many of the themes are familiar, the ending is a bit different, where she is diffused, but not exterminated. Unlike *Final Analysis* or *The Crush*, there is no suggestion that she will return for revenge. The cookie factory setting, the overblown Dunaway character, and the "horror

film” tangles with technology (specifically, a paper shredder and a cookie-making assembly line) push the film partly into the realm of the absurd.

***The Crush* (1993)**

The Crush pushes a melodramatic teenage infatuation with an older man over the edge into the suspense genre. Here, a Drew Barrymore lookalike precocious teenager (Alicia Silverstone) sets her obsessive sites on her family's new coach house tenant (Cary Elwes) — an aspiring journalist. At fourteen, this adolescent is a force to be reckoned with. She is a science whiz far beyond her years, rides horses in competitions, and edits the new tenant's copy (since he doesn't write particularly well). Once again, the “fatal femmette” begins by helping the tenant with a major scoop. But when he shows up with a new girlfriend, things start to go terribly wrong. A feature story mysteriously vanishes from his hard-drive at deadline, and his sources dry up. Then, his photographer girlfriend is locked in her darkroom with a whole hive of wasps. To add insult to injury, when the young man attempts to move out, his admirer accuses him of molesting her.

Although the charges are dropped, the tenant loses his job. Returning to pick up his belongings, he follows the teenager's friend into the main house when he fears for her well-being. This is the setting of the final violent encounter where Silverstone throws her love-object over the balcony. With a broken arm, he manages to scabble up into the attic which houses a merry-go-round (restored for the girl by her lecherous and adoring father). When this same father shows up to wreak vengeance on the supposedly philandering tenant, his daughter intervenes, felling her father with a blunt object. The tenant eventually manages to connect a good solid punch with his good arm, which sends the girl flying off the carousel — to the enthusiastic cheers of the audience. The

film ends on a scene of the girl, soon to be released from a mental hospital for good behaviour, in the process of developing another "crush" on her young doctor.

The Crush works with the recurring theme of the invasion and near takeover of the protagonist's life. Featuring another precocious and voluptuous adolescent girl, the film reverses the usual scenario of teenagers as innocent victims of older men. The film also suggests a bizarre oedipal relationship between father and daughter. Like Drew Barrymore in *Poison Ivy*, ultimately the "unnatural" and destructive force in this film is a young girl's sexuality which is set against an unsuspecting man.

CHAPTER 3: IMMANENT ANALYSIS

PART 1: TACTILE REGULARITIES IN *BASIC INSTINCT*

Having outlined the cycle of female serial killer films in the previous chapter, I turn now to the specific instance of *Basic Instinct*. I have described the fatal femme of this cycle as an anomaly, an exception to the broader generic and socio-discursive representation of women as passive creatures and victims of male violence. If this quality is my central point of interest in the cycle, then *Basic Instinct* is the single film which furthest develops the theme of the "violent femme." Sporting no less than four female murderers, this text exaggerates the cycle's general tendency toward irony, excess, and reversal. As suggested in the preceding chapter, *Basic Instinct* is both an integral part of this recent generic production cycle, and a special case with its high-end production and marketing status. The film's hyperbolic content as well as the extensive controversy and publicity which surrounded it make it an interesting case study — the text which at once exemplifies the "overblown" qualities of this cycle, and yet in some ways exceeds the general generic constraints of the genre.

In this chapter, I develop the "immanent critique" of *Basic Instinct*. Within the following preliminary section of the chapter, I lay the groundwork of the tactile regularities of *Basic Instinct*. As suggested in the introduction, the immanent or "tactile" analysis, following Barthes, is concerned with the complex surface qualities of the text, as well as with the socio-discursive threads which run through it. In the next few pages I will describe some of these general stylistic motifs of the text in relation to the general characteristics of classic *film noir*, and the more recent tendencies of this cycle. I will conclude this preliminary discussion with an elaboration on the "immanent analysis" method, and a description of the codes employed.

Film Noir* Visual Motifs in *Basic Instinct

Traditional *film noir* mise-en-scène criticism provides an incisive point of departure for describing the thematic and formal motifs which operate throughout *Basic Instinct* and this cycle more generally. For, as suggested in the preceding chapter, while these films display a certain hybridity of genre, these shifts are laid over the frame of the traditional *film noir* form. A film like *Basic Instinct* operates according to these cinematic tropes, and sometimes "plays" self-consciously with them, displaying a sensibility reminiscent of Collins' "hyperconscious eclecticism."

Place and Peterson succinctly describe many of the elements common to the "classic" form of 1940s and early 1950s *film noir*. These authors list low-key lighting; considerable depth of field and use of wide angle lenses; claustrophobic or unbalanced compositional balance of shots; and the unsettling use of frames and mirrors to suggest "Doppel-gänger" characterization as important formal characteristics of classic *film noir*. Place and Peterson argue that an overall "expressive" style of shot helps evoke the genre's moods of "claustrophobia, paranoia, despair, and nihilism."¹ With the notable exception of 1940s black and white low-key lighting, *Basic Instinct* incorporates all of these motifs.

In editing and composition patterns, the authors note the common lack of an establishing shot, the use of surveillance style high angle establishing shots, or the jarring move from an extreme long shot establishing shot to a disorienting, claustrophobic extreme closeup or cutaway. This is a common strategy for Verhoeven in *Basic Instinct*, a film which opens on a high angle surveillance shot into a mirror suspended above a bed. This type of eerie establishing shot is a recurring pattern throughout the text, from the roundtable scene with the expert psychiatrist, to the

¹ J.A. Place and L.S. Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of *Film Noir*," *Movies and Method*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 326.

repeated high angle shot of Catherine's beach house. *Basic Instinct's* mise-en-scène also features claustrophobic and unbalanced compositions, with the common use of extreme closeups, or faces and body-parts protruding curiously into the frame. Such compositions are most striking in the interrogation scene.

Further, the frequent use of mirrors (as in the opening sequence), door frames, windows, staircases, and shadows throughout the film plays off the generic pattern in *film noir* described by Place and Peterson.

Framed portraits and mirror reflections, beyond their symbolic representations of fragmented ego or idealized image, sometimes assume ominous and foreboding qualities solely because they are so compositionally prominent. It is common for a character to form constant balanced two-shots of himself and his own mirror reflection or shadow. Such compositions, though superficially balanced, begin to lose their stability in the course of the film as the symbolic Doppel-gänger either is shown to lack its apparent substantiality or else proves to be a dominant and destructive alter ego.²

Beginning from the opening ceiling mirror sequence, through the introduction of the character of Roxy, and the undressing sequence before the interrogation, mirrors figure prominently in *Basic Instinct*. The use of mirrors and the accompanying series of doublings and even triplings of characters is particularly striking in relation to Catherine, Roxy, Beth, and Hazel. The Doppel-gänger theme common to *film noir* operates centrally throughout the narrative with the ongoing play of mistaken identity among these female characters. In addition, the notion of alter ego and doubling is a key socio-discursive motif which works through notions of gender and power: The question of "twinning" or "doubling" is crucial to the adversarial attraction between Nick Curran and Catherine Tramell, who are depicted as male and female versions of the same violent and morally-questionable identity. This equivalency (which is established through

² Place and Peterson 335.

parallel lines of character history rather than visual mirroring) fits them as ideal opponents in a power play of sex and violence.

These, then, are the common visual motifs of *film noir* which establish an atmosphere of intrigue, moral instability, claustrophobia, and confusion within the text. Feminist writings on *film noir* help specify the central relationship of gender to the moral struggles within the genre. Like many of the classic texts of the genre (such as *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946)), *Basic Instinct* and the other films of the cycle in question are figured obsessively around the problematic of gender and sexuality within the troubled *film noir* universe. Janey Place, for example, notes some of the visual and thematic motifs specific to the sexually-potent female characters which figure so prominently in 1940s and 1950s films. According to Place, the strength of these "spider women"

is expressed in the visual style by their dominance in composition, angle, camera movement and lighting. They are overwhelmingly the compositional focus, generally center frame and/or in the foreground, or pulling focus into the background. They control camera movement, seeming to direct the camera (and the hero's gaze, with our own) irresistibly with them as they move.³

The visual dominance of the Catherine Tramell character is one of the most striking visual motifs in *Basic Instinct*. From the moment of her introduction into the plot, Catherine's face and body, her powerful returned gaze, are the central visual and narrative elements of every scene she inhabits. The interrogation scene is one pronounced example of this trend where, from her entry into the room, Catherine's face and body literally crowd the men out to the edges of the film frame. In her simple white shift, she stands out from the sombre earth tones of the shadowy room and the grey-suited police. When she takes her place front and center stage for the questioning, she

³ Janey Place, "Women in film noir," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 45.

dominates the entire scene both through her sexually provocative manipulation of the dialogue, and through her formal positioning.

Catherine's central visual presence throughout the film reinforces and rearticulates the classic dynamic of cinema identified in feminist film theory: woman as spectacle. The director structures Catherine's scenes as vehicles to look and look at her, to delve her enigmatic presence and obscure motivations. However, this positioning is not merely one of unqualified exploitation (as often implied in feminist film theory); here, Catherine consolidates an overwhelming position of power in her returned gaze, and in her control of the dynamics of the spectacle. Catherine seems to thrive on exhibitionism, and never does her apparent control over the dynamics of looking waver. The combination of Catherine's formal positioning in the frame, and her implied omniscience at the level of plot establish strong threads which move throughout the film. The tension between woman as spectacle and the considerable implied control exhibited by Catherine as object of the gaze constitutes a central formal and thematic conflict within the film.

These visual motifs, then, exemplify the *film noir* codes which operate as visual discursive regularities in the text; such generic conventions create a shorthand for some of the recurring thematics of the genre. As discussed above, the generic conventions of this contemporary cycle overlap considerably with those of classic *film noir*. However, I have noted one important stylistic divergence between the old and the new, notably in the area of lighting.

Lighting

Clearly, the lighting style of *Basic Instinct* is closely bound up in the play of light and shadow common to the classic *noir* form. In particular, the film's recurring device of venetian blinds (particularly in the inner city and police station sequences) slices the

image into horizontal bands of light and shadow. Also, there is frequent use of staircases, mirrors, and door and window frames which generate odd distributions of light and shadow. Nonetheless, there is a striking discrepancy between the gritty black and white expressionist quality of classic *film noir*, and the contemporary pastel coloured stock of *Basic Instinct*. Within the text, a few isolated scenes work with the dark and rainy nightscape of classic *film noir*. These include the scene after the interrogation where Nick drives Catherine home through a torrential downpour, or the car chase sequence where Roxy meets her end. However, these sequences stand out from the general texture and shading of the film, which is characteristically daylit and airy, with its neutral windblown tones of filtered coastal San Francisco sunshine.

To be more precise, the cinematography of *Basic Instinct* is divided between these relatively sparse night-for-night scenes, and two other general lighting schemes. The inner city spaces associated with "hard-boiled detective" Nick Curran (primarily the police station and his apartment) are cluttered with messy piles of papers and objects, bodies, and shadows. While the venetian blind motif figures prominently, the space is not strongly divided between light and shadow, but tends more toward neutral tones of grey and beige. The second lighting scheme, in contrast, is associated with the palatial spaces of Catherine Tramell. Her home in town and the beach house are bright, spacious, and uncluttered. This misleading transparency and airiness is facilitated by walls of huge windows and mirrors — features which also allow for common instances of voyeurism when Nick visits Catherine unannounced. Inside the beach house, the light emanates from outside, filtered through glass, slightly muted indoors with a curious, eerie undulating quality.⁴

⁴ This undulating quality of light filtered through huge windows has a watery effect, although there is not a drop of rain outside in the California sunshine. This effect is echoed in Brian De Palma's terrifying *Body Double* (1984) where the hero witnesses the gruesome murder of a neighbour through her picture window. Another film set in affluent California environs, the quality of the light and its association with voyeurism and sudden violence are strikingly similar in the two films.

This general lighting strategy with its predominance of bright, airy spaces is common to the films in this cycle. In contrast with the low key-lit, gritty inner city settings of classic *film noir*, the contemporary cycle plays off the disjuncture between affluent and beautiful settings, and the underlying evils to be found there. This is true of the jetsetting confines of Catherine Tramell, as well as the airy apartments and bright spacious family homes of *Single White Female* or *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*. Not the dark inner city environs normally associated with crime, these are white, bright, affluent, and essentially sterile environments which are transformed through the twists of plot and character into places of fear. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this "tactile regularity" intersects with a broader tendency of recent "yuppie thrillers." Commonly, the "final girl" scenario of *Sleeping with the Enemy*, or the endangered yuppie households of *Fatal Attraction*, *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, *Unlawful Entry*, or *Pacific Heights* exemplify affluent private spaces invaded by evil forces.

Sound

Having outlined some of the recurring visual motifs of *Basic Instinct*, I will now sketch out the rudiments of the use of sound in the text. The above mise-en-scène approach frames the cinema as an almost exclusively visual medium, often underplaying the vital role of the soundtrack in producing atmosphere and building suspense. *Film noir* draws from a whole series of generic conventions in the soundtrack (footsteps, unmotivated sounds, screams, gunshots) to create the perception of negative space and suspense. Further, the subtle role of music weaving through the film's action emphasizes particular moments and builds atmosphere.

In *Basic Instinct*, extraneous sound effects are minimal. Verhoeven chooses instead to work primarily with motivated diegetic sound, combined with omnipresent (and sometimes "overdone") extra-diegetic musical punctuation. The soundtrack also

functions dramatically through silences and gaps; the director employs these strategies through a strange, hackneyed quality of dialogue and narrative action involving frequent unmotivated pauses at key moments for emphasis or ellipsis. Threads of dialogue are picked up and dropped without clear motivation, but often in the gap a faint minor tremulous violin theme fades in as a type of emphasis or foreshadowing. The fuller orchestral score is employed typically as a bridging device between scenes, and to build dramatic effect within particular scenes (for example, in the opening murder sequence).

In the analysis which follows, I will describe in more detail how some of these elements of sound, mise-en-scène, montage, and editing weave together to create particular affective and thematic emphases. This immanent criticism will address the tactile visible and audible qualities of film which operate in tandem with narrative structure and overlapping discursive fields.

Immanent Analysis: "Pregnant Moments" and "Multi-Media Events"

The above description of "tactile regularities" lays the groundwork for the following in-depth analysis of key parts of the film. Clearly, however, the detailed, dense and painstaking quality of a Barthesian film analysis could produce a potentially infinite critique of a single text (for example, Barthes' analysis of a novella comprised an entire volume). Since the purpose here is to pull out strands of particular import to the socio-discursive fields of gender, violence, and power, I have chosen to focus on several "nodal" sequences. The scenes under analysis are not selected at random (as Barthes claims of his *lexia* in *S/Z*). Rather, they are drawn from the opening establishing sequences, and later on from key dramatic moments which provide rich material for the broader concerns of the thesis. These scenes or series of scenes are indicative of the functioning of the text as a whole (as are the visual motifs outlined above); they are also culturally and emotionally-charged nodal points where complex points of character,

motivation, power-struggle, and contradiction converge. The scenes which highlight elements of gendered power, transgressive sexuality, or the problematization of the gaze are favoured here for analysis; these themes are not imposed on the text, however, but are central to the narrative and formal fabric of *Basic Instinct*.

The analysis begins with the opening several sequential scenes as a means of demonstrating how characters and key themes are established. The subsequent scenes selected for analysis foreground "pregnant moments" of dramatic socio-cultural import (for example, the opening sequence which establishes the shocking figure of the beautiful, blonde murderess). Further, the "multi-media events" indicated in the analysis are of particular interest as they circulate semi-autonomously through the film's promotional machinery. The focus on these contentious and multiply-accented nodal points is especially pertinent in light of the multiple mediation of cinematic texts within the context of the contemporary New Hollywood.

In her discussion of Dorothy Arzner's work, Pam Cook writes of "pregnant moments" as instances of narrative interruption. According to Cook, "The force of the pregnant moment is that it works against the complex unity of the text by opening up the whole area of representation to the question of desire and its articulation."⁵ I would argue that particular moments of spectacle in *Basic Instinct* operate in this manner to interrupt the narrative and to problematize "conventional" gender and sexual mores. The famous instance of the exposed privates of Catherine Tramell during the interrogation scene is one example,⁶ as are the shots of Catherine and Roxy dancing close together at the club scene.

⁵ Pam Cook, "Approaching the Work of Dorothy Arzner," *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988) 52.

⁶ For example, on the high-profile *Barbara Walters Special* aired just before the Academy Awards (CTV, 29 March 1993), this sequence is replayed almost in its entirety. During the ensuing interview with Sharon Stone, Walters asks her about "that scene," and Stone responds that she no longer needs to coyly ask which one she means. The scene has become an event in itself,

The excessive mediation of contemporary film adds another dimension to the "pregnant moment" in the case of *Basic Instinct*, as these particular shocking and transgressive moments are singled out and redeployed through television and movie trailers. Within the multi-mediated context of postmodern genericity, these "pregnant moments" are catapulted into particular fragmentary importance as *amplified multi-media events in themselves*. These "multi-media events" are indicated within the immanent analysis; because of their clear multiple articulations they provide particularly rich material for analysis, and multiple openings for "lines of flight" out into broader socio-discursive questions around women, violence, and power.

Immanent Analysis: Structure

The structure of the immanent analysis is relatively straightforward. Much of the "tactile" stuff of *Basic Instinct* is depicted scene by scene, through descriptive passages. Following the "writerly" quality of Barthes' project, these passages set out to convey key elements of mood, of mise-en-scène, dialogue, character, and pacing. The transition from what Shaviro calls "the fullness of the image" to these descriptive passages is no simple recording, but in fact a transposition in form. I do not claim here to produce an exhaustive account, or even an "objective" account of the film — as this is clearly an untenable project. The entire spirit of this venture is to move around the claims or intentionality of auteurism, or the search for "deeper truths" implicit within psychoanalytic film criticism. Instead, within the productivity of the writing process, I seek to evoke key textual and discursive qualities which point out the contingent and multiplicatory process of meaning-making in all cultural texts. The gist of this analysis is

almost independent of the film — yet is still intrinsically bound up in the film's "narrative image" and larger discursive articulation.

its simultaneous attention to the complexities of the text, and the necessary and contradictory "lines out" into broader discursive formations.

In order to further develop the density and layering of the project, I supplement these descriptive passages with more precise analytic sections. These analytic sections are divided into "codes" adapted from those employed by Barthes in *S/Z*.⁷

Hence we use *Code* here not in the sense of a list, a paradigm that must be reconstituted. The code is a perspective of quotations, a mirage of structures; we know only its departures and returns; the units which have resulted from it (those we inventory) are themselves, always, ventures out of the text, the mark, the sign of a virtual digression toward the remainder of the catalogue...⁸

The codes employed in this project are not intended as scientifically distinct categories. They overlap, and each encompasses a broad spectrum of concerns. This need not be a shortcoming, for the very fluidity of the approach is comparable to the openness and productivity of meaning in cultural texts. Barthes claims that there is a potentially infinite number of codes which could be applied to any text. The reading provided is consequently always partial, guided by the orientation of the analysis: "The five codes create a kind of network a *topos* through which the entire text passes (or rather, in passing, becomes text)."⁹ Such immanent analysis is not content with an apparently descriptive role: it seizes responsibility for the necessarily productive role of criticism. The channels suggested by the codes which I employ are related to the functions of genre within the text, and to the socio-discursive questions of gender, power, and sexuality.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

⁸ Barthes 20.

⁹ Barthes 20.

The Codes

CONNOTATIONAL CODES (CON)¹⁰ are adapted from Barthes' *semes* or semantic code. The broader term "connotation" is more appropriate to cinematic analysis, as connotation is not merely a semantic or written code. As Julia Lesage suggests, connotation in film analysis includes a whole series of subtle elements related to the rituals of everyday life: "Small gestures, architecture, fashion, furniture, time of day, assumptions about urban life, cars and traffic, food and drink customs, courtship customs, etc., bring important subcodes to and are the visual "stuff" of narrative film."¹¹

Within this analysis, I employ the connotative code primarily to indicate relatively straightforward references which might be drawn from a single shot, a brief series of shots, or a brief line of dialogue. Not strictly divisible from cinematic and cultural codes, the connotative code operates as a kind of shorthand. Many of the metaphors and references are not explicitly indicated, but are established in the descriptive passages. An exhaustive listing of all such elements for even a written text would be laborious. Given the density and complexity of the cinematic form, I have concentrated on the major, often recurring traces of meaning edited through the concerns of the thesis.

HERMENEUTIC CODES (HER) Given my preoccupation here with suspense in the figuring of gender, power, sexuality, and violence, I have collapsed Barthes' narrative and hermeneutic codes into this single category. Within the thriller or suspense genre, hermeneutic codes are absolutely central. As Gledhill suggests, the investigation of a crime and of an enigmatic woman who holds the key are commonly twinned in *film*

¹⁰ Christian Metz has used "connotational codes" in cinematic analysis to designate "atmosphere," or "a manner of filming" (see "Connotation Reconsidered," *Discourse #2* (1980): 18-20.) Here, such qualities are dispersed through the descriptive passages, as well as the connotational and cinematic codes. As a general note, the "codes" employed here are intended as flexible tools of analysis tailored to the needs of this project. They are quite distinct from those of Metz or of other theorists' meditations on "codes."

¹¹ Julia Lesage, "*S/Z* and *The Rules of the Game*," *Movies and Methods Volume II*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 481.

noir.¹² This is the case in *Basic Instinct*, where the "whodunnit" narrative is intricately connected with the investigation of Catherine Tramell's motivations and sexual conduct. These twinned quests provide the motor which drives the plot. The "hermeneutic codes" trace the digressions, and especially the modalities of repetition, pacing, and suspense which structure the film.

CINEMATIC CODES (CIN) This category is used to indicate cinematic conventions such as camera angles, lighting, sound, editing, mise-en-scène. Further, I use the cinematic codes as a shorthand for generic stylistic and thematic tropes, as well as the cinematic quotations so central to the fabric of "postmodern genericity." In an attempt to move beyond the reduction of film to the visual, I pay particular attention to the role of the soundtrack. Dynamic elements of editing, pacing, and flow interact closely with the hermeneutic codes. Perhaps the most difficult to describe and analyse within this adapted literary mode of analysis, these qualities are developed through descriptive passages and within the cinematic and hermeneutic code analysis.

Clearly, cinematic codes overlap with cinematic, connotative, and cultural codes. While connotative codes relate to common signifiers of everyday life, the cinematic codes relate more explicitly to historically-developed conventions of the medium. These conventions, often related to genre, provide a glossary of common audience or critical interpretations — and a hook into the discursive regularities of the text and the cycle more generally. Far from neutral or transparent, these codes refer to key problematics within feminist politics and film theory, such as the gendered gaze.

CULTURAL CODES (CUL) Whereas for Barthes the cultural codes (or referential codes) refer to "a science or a body of knowledge," in this analysis, cultural codes function much more generally. In particular, I employ cultural codes to explore dense,

¹² Christine Gledhill, "Klute 1: a contemporary film noir and feminist criticism," Women and Film No. 15.

complex, and problematic cultural preoccupations such as gender, power, violence, and sexuality. The particular recurring elements which I take up in these sections emerge organically from the substance of the film, yet are inflected by the particular focus of the thesis. I deploy the cultural codes as a means to delve into nodal aspects of the text which stretch far beyond the limits of the frame, into broader socio-discursive questions. The cultural codes, then, provide the springboard for possible "lines of flight" — some of which are taken up in the final two chapters of the thesis. As one specific example, I have designated "irony" as a cultural code which flows through the text in relation to broader trends in postmodern cultural production. In the immanent analysis I merely mark out the moments which suggest ironic doubling or overstatement: I will return to the question of irony at some length in Chapter 4.

SYMBOLIC CODES (SYM) For Barthes, the symbolic codes describe structural and psychoanalytic motifs common to the culture as a whole. As this particular project attempts to move beyond the limits of psychoanalytic film criticism, I use the symbolic codes differently. The symbolic code highlights abstract symbols (such as "whiteness"), and structural motifs within the film such as narrative reversals, and "doubling" of characters. Because of particular recurring themes within *Basic Instinct* and the cycle more generally, I have adapted this category to discuss highly-symbolic knowledges which circulate within the text — particularly psychoanalytic¹³ and legal codes. Symbolic codes also designate the text's common self-conscious narrative devices such as the "book within the film" which signals more abstract preoccupations with authorship and meaning.

¹³ In this regard, my "symbolic codes" are closer to Barthes' "cultural codes," except that psychoanalysis is not granted a privileged position in relation to language and meaning.

CHAPTER 3: IMMANENT ANALYSIS

PART 2: IMMANENT ANALYSIS OF *BASIC INSTINCT*

The Crime

To the accompaniment of a swelling orchestral score, fade from black to a disorienting fractured screen. The modest white block letters of the credits are superimposed over this shifting ground. Suggesting interlocking aspects of a shattered mirror or glass, the fragmented forms behind the titles flicker with a golden glow and obscure, undulating fleshtone forms. [CON. These obscure and suggestive forms are reminiscent of the so-called subliminal images in magazine advertisement ice cubes.] These forms are not continuous behind some screen of shapes; similar in kind, they are disconnected from one another, unified by their sensual motion and complemented by the full, romantic musical backdrop.

With the end of the titles, the first movement of the theme score completes itself and pauses. A second, more mournful theme begins as the screen fades to a geometrically-balanced but disorienting shot. As the camera somersaults slowly, methodically, the viewer becomes aware that she is looking into a mirror suspended on the ceiling high above a huge bed. The restless camera zooms into the mirror to reveal two tiny figures writhing in mid-coitus; their bodies are entwined side by side, facing one another. Just as the camera tilts down the wall to abandon the mirror's high angle reflection, the woman climbs on top of the man. The smooth tilt of the camera continues past the moment of recognition of the suspended mirror [SYM. Reflections, artifice, duplicity. They did it with mirrors.] down to the bed itself, from the realm of reflection into the act itself. The camera holds on a rear framing of a perfectly desirable woman's hard white body, her firm and rounded buttocks straddled over the man. She rides him slowly,

gathering momentum. Their heavy breathing becomes audible over the score. The mournful violin theme tumbles on, building with the motion of the two bodies.

Cut to a series of quick shots: Hovering over the man, the woman's face obscured by long blonde hair hanging disheveled over her face; the prone middle-aged man's beefy but still handsome face in the throes of passion, sucking her fingers. As the score tumbles on faster and fuller, their heavy breathing becomes audible. The camera pans with the man's hands along the woman's slim and flawless body, tiny breasts, massaging her firm buttocks which ride his still-virile but flabby body home. The woman is on top. She controls the sequence of acts. In contrast to the great passion implied, there is little intimacy: Bodies joined only at the genitals, they never kiss. Another shot of the hovering dominatrix, this time through the wrought-iron pattern of the head of the bed. [CIN. *Film noir* visual code: fragmenting the frame with heavy, dark dividing lines.]

Quickly she pulls a white scarf from under the pillow, efficiently securing the man's hands to the bedframe. Her movements are self-assured, strong. With a decisive and audible "swish" of the fabric, she knots the scarf tightly while the man bobs his head (in vain) to catch her breasts in his mouth. [SYM. Object-Relations. The "good object" and the "bad mother."] His moans and her sighs and the music get louder, more frantic, as they gyrate toward climax. Cut to the "come shot": close in on the man's middle-aged face in orgasm. He yells in pleasure. [CIN. Pornographic convention. The "come shot."]

Cut to a medium shot as the woman arches way back in orgasm. The camera follows her hand snaking back behind her under the covers from where she retrieves a small, sharp icepick, and lunges forward. A quick cut to an agonizing close up of the man's face registering surprise and horror as he sees the icepick descend on his jugular. He screams a second time, now in shock and terror. The woman's naked torso splattered with blood in a frenzy of stabbing and jabbing. Sadistic, frenetic, she stabs him one, two, three... ten times to the loud staccato crashes in the score. Gotcha!

Analysis

HER. The opening sequence establishes a scenario which recurs several times throughout the rest of the film; the murder at the apex of orgasm sets up the expectation for subsequent murders in future sex scenes. This scene, then, establishes the link between forbidden sex acts, pleasure, and death central to the film's promotional machinery and plot. Its key place as the opening scene, the "hook" for the viewer, gives it considerable thematic importance and emotional/ "shock" impact. The setup is a visceral and visual roller coaster ride beginning with the vertigo separation of mirrored voyeurism, couched in a full and reassuring orchestral score, suggesting soft-core porn. From the comfortable distance of the mirror, we are swiftly drawn into the thick of the act, to the interchanging points of view of the partners. The quick editing and the building tension of the music create a quick and dirty climax in the film's first 90 seconds.

As the opening moment in a thriller, this scene is pivotal as a means of establishing atmosphere and the bare bones of the mystery to be solved in the balance of the film. Who are these people? Who is the murderess? Why did she do it? The hermeneutic code of the crime itself is remarkably straightforward in *Basic Instinct*. The opening sequence, with its blonde murdering woman's face obscured is, in spite of the dizzying array of twists and turns which follow, exactly what it seems. According to the clues offered in the film and its bookend structure, the most plausible solution is that Catherine did indeed do it.¹ For all of its density of plot, doubling and tripling of characters, and false identities *Basic Instinct* lingers in the realm of the obvious.

¹ Part of the Queer Nation strategy of discouraging people from seeing the film was to reveal the film's outcome during protests: flyers and picket signs were printed with the slogan, "Catherine did it." However, this protest only served to spur viewers into the cinema. Due partly to the controversy, this scenario also points to the fact that much of the thrill of the thriller is not in knowing the ending, so much as the pleasure of suspense, lull, climax, and resolution drawn from the expectations of genre.

Detective Curran leads the spectator through a wishful exercise of disproving what we all know to be Catherine's guilt.

SYM. Titles. Titles are a key to any film's "narrative image" and *Basic Instinct* is no exception. At first glance, the title "Basic Instinct" has a built-in redundancy. For what can be more "basic" than instincts? Through Darwinian association, the most "basic instinct" might be the instinct to survive. Pushing the analysis one step further, though, the notion of "instinct" is commonly linked to influential Freudian ideas, where the primary "instinct" is toward sexual pleasure.² And for Freud, the "basic" motors of human conduct (not entirely rooted in biology) are the two (amoral) "drives" toward pleasure, and toward death.

CIN. The Gaze. Mirrors are a stock element of *film noir* visual iconography. Reflections and high angle camera angles which occur throughout the film distance the viewer from the action and disorient, highlighting and reinforcing the sense of voyeurism. Mirrors articulate with broader postmodern discourses of artifice and mediation. This scene's momentary confusion between mirrored reflection and the "real" (mediated) body is echoed in the prelude to the interrogation, when Nick watches through the mirror as Catherine changes her clothes.

CUL. Violence. In the realm of the much-promised sex/violence combination, such a two-fisted, no holds barred opening for a thriller delivers a double dose in the first scene. The promise of promotion fulfilled, the subsequent echoes of this scene (down to a veritable replay of this series of shots and the absurd frequency of replay of that perfect body lunging fatally forward) play off the shock of the opening to continually build dread. And anticipation that the male protagonist Nick Curran will finally experience the attack dished out so brutally in the opening sequence. In fact, this scenario in its

² Sigmund Freud, "On Sexual Aberrations," trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards, The Pelican Freud Library Volume 7: On Sexuality (London: Pelican Books, 1977) 82-83.

violence is never replayed in full. The bulk of the actual "violence" splattered through this film occurs in its first three-and-a-half minutes.

Transgressive Sexuality. Another major theme established in this opening sequence is the persona of the female dominatrix. She is linked from the outset with dangerous, forbidden sexuality and death. Most striking about this scene is the way that the woman, on top throughout, orchestrates the sex act, the man's pleasure (and her own). She instigates the bondage, she offers of herself as she pleases while he lies prone, a prisoner to the pleasure and death she offers. At the final moment, she brings him to climax, and brutally stabs him to death. Not only positioned symbolically on top and in control, she is younger, her body is harder, stronger, while he appears flabby and weak, past his prime. This is an important departure from the more common scenario in mainstream film which still favours the missionary position, the man in control of the sex act. Sexually-assured and "aggressive" women who practice bondage are still the exception in visual representation outside of some pornographic scenarios. Verhoeven sets out here to shock Middle America.³

The high drama of the scene links the blonde [CON. glamour, desirability, often fluffiness or stupidity] dominatrix inextricably with violent death. The blonde, thin, perfectly-proportioned (faceless) woman is the Hollywood sex object par excellence: she is pure sex, and outrageously, the essence of death.⁴ Like the praying mantis, she

³ The S/M premise established here with relatively mild silk scarf bondage becomes the central preoccupation in the 1993 clone *Body of Evidence*. Here, the irrepressible Madonna (author and star of the soft-core porn best-seller *Sex*) is accused, literally, of fucking a man to death. The murder scene is decked out with all manner of S/M accoutrements including nipple clamps, handcuffs, chains, and whips. Meanwhile, the blonde dynamo sets out to seduce her lawyer (Willem Dafoe) with some of the same tricks, including intercourse on a bed of broken glass, and dripping hot wax on his penis.

⁴ The blonde, beautiful murderess is not a historically-isolated figure, but can be traced through the history of *film noir*: the essence of Beauty is not what she seems to be. Historically, the murdering seductress can be seen in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Out of the Past* (1947), etc. As suggested in Chapter 2, within the cycle of films in question, the "fatal femme" is the central unifying figure who functions, with variations, according to this historical convention.

couples then destroys her mate. The fascination with "speaking sex," with exploring and defining "aberrant sexuality" identified by Foucault in The History of Sexuality⁵ operates centrally in *Basic Instinct*.⁶ The audience is tantalized by exotic sexual practices, by spectacular silver screen orgasms well beyond the magnitude of "normal" sexual practices. Yet the price paid (by the man) must be death.

CUL. The "Violent Femme". Pushing the point further again, perhaps what is most disturbing about this sequence is not a mere silk scarf (suggesting mild S/M practice) but the fact that it is the woman who controls the scenario. This is the root of what is awry. After all, the dead bodies of women associated with sexual conquest, rape, and murder are commonplace in North American popular culture. When the roles are reversed, however, the shock effect registered is amplified. The bottom line is *women just don't do things like that*. Statistically, even fictionally. The "fatal femme" in action, produces a pause, a "pregnant moment" because her very presence flies in the face of the cultural regularity of women's perceived passivity.

Irony. Which catapults us one further in the analysis: We are moving into a (possible) realm of the absurd, the ironic, the surreal. What does it *mean* to have a blonde dominatrix slash a man mid-orgasm? Can such an "act," reflected and refracted through the artifice of a multitude of mirrors and lenses, be read at face value? What of the male anxiety (and fantasy) registered in the prone, powerless man dished out his pleasure and his pain in equal doses? Is the sharp, commonplace castrating household object (icepick) not the perfect resolution to this scenario? The excessive gusto of the blonde crypto-killer, the amplified sexual pleasure, the flourish of the icepick are tailored to the crescendo of editing and orchestral climax. All these converge to create a

⁵ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction (New York: Random House, 1990).

⁶ See the discussion of "Speaking Sex" in Chapter 4.

masterful effect of shock, horror, fear (and perhaps a glimmer of reflexivity) in the spectator.

SYM. Castration. The ubiquitous icepick provides a clue to the ironic sensibility which can be traced through the text and its "narrative image." The centrality of the icepick in the film's publicity, and in this sequence which recurs three times, suggest a "castration" metaphor which is far less than subtle. Although it could be argued from a psychoanalytic perspective that such a figure is suggested within the filmmaker's or the spectator's subconscious, this seems unlikely given the almost absurd return of the repressed castrating object. The icepick itself crops up innocently in the preparation of drinks both at Catherine's and Nick's (where Catherine takes the icepick out of his inexperienced hand to hack away herself, saying "Here, let me do that for you"). Later in the film the detectives discover that the icepick was also the *modus operandus* in a Berkeley slaying, and in Catherine's book. Further, Hazel's and Roxy's mass murders of their male kinfolk were spectacularly accomplished with a carving knife which had been a wedding present, and Daddy's razor, respectively.

"Shooter" at the Scene of the Crime

From the crashing of the musical climax and blood-spattered spectacle of the stabbing, the music cuts out all together. We are looking at an establishing shot of a hilly San Francisco street the morning after the murder. The filtered morning sunlight and faint hustle and bustle of police are serene after the intensity of the last scene. A car approaches at high speed and screeches to a halt, breaking the early morning quiet. Out steps investigating officer Detective Nick Curran (Michael Douglas) and amiable plump sidekick partner Gus Moran (George Dzundza). [CIN. Douglas stepping out of a patrol car is seemingly pulled direct from a scene of *The Streets of San Francisco*, only twenty

years later. CON. San Francisco: city of widespread notorious sexual vice and forbidden pleasures: homosexuality, AIDS.]

As we follow the detectives through the tall wrought-iron gates, the grounds and entranceway reveal the victim's mansion to be huge and stately. Inside the house, Nick and Gus move through dimly-lit hallways. Their progress up a winding narrow stairway is shot from an oblique angle looking down the diagonal pattern of stairs and bannisters; the hallways are cluttered with unidentified objects. The detectives pause to glance at several art objects on the walls, including a medium-sized Picasso. [CON. Wealth. Artistic taste and/or decadence. CIN. Film noir visual motifs. This sequence is a quotation from the opening sequence of Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941).]

Stepping into the bedroom, they brush past a curtain of red beads, into the dimly-lit, shadowy scene of the crime. Here, the light is tinged with red, the stale bordello taint of the morning after. The police officers are shot in tight, with cluttered, crowded frames which produce an atmosphere of sordid claustrophobia. Unperturbed, Curran exchanges cop banter with Gus and the other police already at the scene of the crime. Curran's natural habitat, this patter establishes the homo-social bonding atmosphere of brother police officers. For example, they discuss the maid as a possible suspect.

Gus: "Maybe the maid did it."

Captain Walker: "She's 54 years old and weighs 240 pounds."

Black detective: "No bruises or the body."

Gus: (weighing easily 240 himself, smirks) "It ain't the maid."

After the terrifying castration scenario of the opening sequence, this small joking exchange serves to typically reposition the film's discourse around gender and sexuality firmly back in the familiar male court. They are interrupted, however, by a sharp blast of country music from the stereo turned on mistakenly by Nick. This interruption undercuts the smug banter with a hint of anxiety and shifts the focus back to the corpse on the bed,

a retired rock 'n roll star with the appropriate name of Johnny Boz. Though obscured in shadow, the body forms the visual and psychological center of the frame.

Black Detective: "There are cum stains all over the sheets."

Nick: "Very impressive."

Gus: "It looks like he got off before he got off." (uneasy laughter)

Captain Talcott: (nose to nose with Nick) "Listen Curran, I'll be getting a lot of heat on this. I don't want any mistakes, *Shooter*."

The conflict between Captain Talcott (police brass connected to the Mayor's office) and Detective Curran introduces a division in the ranks of police, and throws a shadow of doubt over Curran's background. Curran is established as a street-wise cop with a chip on his shoulder and a shady past. [HER. Curran's history.] The question riding over Nick's reputation is further reinforced by Walker's final admonishment at the end of the scene.

Walker: "Keep your three o'clock, Curran."

Nick: "Do you want me to work the case or...?"

Walker: (emphatic) "I said *keep it!*"

Analysis

SYM. Gendered Space. The cluttered, dimly-lit all-male environment of all police environments (the scene of the crime, the police station) are set symbolically against the female alliances represented primarily by Catherine and the other women in the film. The scene is split psychologically between the unconcerned police patter on the job, and their underlying anxiety in the face of an inconceivable and threatening crime — an "upstanding citizen" murdered by an assumed female lover. This anxiety is underlined by the formal centrality of the corpse, the nervous laughter, and Curran's jumpy blundering with the stereo.

HER. This scene is important in establishing important aspects of the crime to be solved. The police find cocaine, for example at the scene of the crime. [CON. Decadence. The use of drugs in sex, particularly expensive drugs. ("Just say no.")] In addition, we discover that the victim Johnny Boz was a retired rock 'n roll star with links to the Mayor's office, and that the name of his girlfriend is Catherine Tramell.

More importantly, however, the scene establishes Nick Curran's mouthy, authority-challenging character, and the hint of a shady past. Also established is the homo-social police brotherhood which is his natural environment. Alliances and partnerships are all-important for police investigations, and Curran's trusty partner Gus is a stock character introduced here — a loyal and good-natured sidekick who weighs against the undercutting corrupt element of police patronage represented by Captain Talcott and his links with the Mayor's office. In keeping with the moral ambiguity of *film noir*, the tried and true investigator is no longer above suspicion, but has lapsed into the pit of corruption which threatens to envelop his entire universe, his personal relationships, the police department.

CUL. The nickname "Shooter" used sarcastically by Talcott throws a further clue toward Curran's past crimes. Partner Gus, alternately called "Hoss," further links the names to the classic Western tv show, *Bonanza*. This reference adds a note of self-consciousness to the script: Both a lack of seriousness among cops in relation to violence and law enforcement, and a reference to other days of law enforcement fiction when you could still tell the good guys by their white hats.⁷

⁷ Since his beginnings in *The Streets of San Francisco*, Michael Douglas (son of similarly granite-jawed leading man Kirk Douglas) has played heroic male characters — as in *The China Syndrome* (1979) or *Coma* (1978). Douglas' more recent casting in *The War of the Roses* (1989) and more specifically, *Fatal Attraction* (1987), frame this formerly above board authority figure in sordid domestic squabbles. In *Basic Instinct*, his Nick character leaps beyond the pale with drug and alcohol addictions, superfluous violence, and his wife's suicide on his record. This role, and the moral fabric of *Basic Instinct* generally suggest what R. Barton Palmer calls the "negativity" of the *noir* genre, where the "firmament" of traditional moral and ethical codes are in flux. (See R.

Scene 3: Roxy

Establishing shot: an aerial "surveillance shot" of Nick and Gus approaching a large San Francisco town house [CON. Wealth.]. The bright afternoon sunlight is slightly filtered by high clouds typical of the coastal area. When the Hispanic maid answers the door, she admits them to a large, white and airy foyer with high ceilings. An expansive, gracious stairway dominates the foyer. As the maid goes to call "Catherine," the officers snoop around. They spot a large Picasso.

Gus: "Well, ain't that cute. They've got his and hers Picassos."

Nick: "Gus, I didn't know you even knew who Picasso was."

Gus: "Sure I do. It says right here." (points to signature)

Nick: "Hers is bigger."

This exchange establishes an important and recurring contrast between the "regular working stiff" persona of Gus (reflected in his appearance, and especially in his speech) and the high-powered wealth and sophistication of Catherine and her world. Nick, while belonging primarily to the workaday world of Gus, is slightly more cultured and can cross the boundary more readily. [CON. Class.] In direct contrast with Gus (and to some extent Nick), the trappings of wealth, the spaciousness and grandeur of the home, stand in for the Catherine not yet met. Although she is absent, this is her space. This airy, spacious mise-en-scène is linked throughout the film with her affluence and sophistication. [HER. Sets up expectation of Catherine's imminent appearance.]

At this moment, Gus and Nick are interrupted by Roxy's arrival. Nick looks over toward the huge staircase in the foyer, and catches a glimpse of a young woman self-assuredly descending the stairs. His point of view is framed and accentuated by the door frame. [CIN. This "reframing" of the shot emphasizes Nick's (male) point of view, and

Barton Palmer, "Apocalyptic Desire: *Film Noir* and the Woman's Picture," diss., New York U, 1989, 7.)

highlights the voyeurism common throughout the film.] Cut back to a point of view shot over Nick and Gus' shoulders as they watch Roxy approach. A frontal two-shot further foregrounds their appraisal of the young, slender woman in tight jeans and low-cut vest.

Roxy, seeing them standing there, halts at the first landing several steps above the front hallway. At her height advantage, she is framed in low angle long shot with a haughty and provocative expression. Her body language is tough or "butch": tight jeans, cowboy boots, legs apart, leaning casually on railing. As they ask her questions about Johnny Boz, her face expressionless (characteristic of Roxy throughout the film).

Roxy: "You're looking for Catherine, not me." [HER. Mistaken identity.]

Nick: "Who are you?"

Roxy: "I'm Roxy. I'm her *"friend."* ["Friend" stated coyly, with a peculiar emphasis: CON. lesbian relationship.]

Nick: (patronizing, slightly hostile) "Well, Roxy, do you know where your "friend" is?" (Roxy gives the beach house address.)

As the detectives turn to leave, Roxy moves in front of the mirror [SYM. doubling] at the landing to face them in a "duel" stance, low angle long shot, legs apart with cowboy boots and arms dangling at her side. Deadpan, deadly serious, she states, "You're wasting your time. Catherine didn't kill him." She is defiant, cold. Cut to a closeup held for an uncomfortably long time as she looks just past the camera. Roxy's gaze is unyielding, her classic attractiveness flawed by this icy expression. The long take obliges the audience to look and look and look. The door slams. Fade up foreboding theme music.

Analysis

CIN. The Gendered Gaze. It is significant that Nick sees Roxy first and has a chance to "check her out" before she sees him. This gives him the advantage, and

establishes status quo looking relations, i.e. the woman as (sex) object of the male gaze. The framing of Roxy on the stairs in front of a mirror in a low-cut vest and tight pants reinforces the element of woman, in this case a "deviant" woman, as object to be looked at. Her positioning in the frame, as well as the particularly long takes (both long shots and the final close up) invite or oblige the viewer to "check her out" as do Nick and Gus. However, her body language and facial expression suggest resistance, defiance, anger, the possibility of later retribution.

HER. This sequence operates as a teaser to build up the suspense and expectation of meeting Catherine Tramell, the girlfriend of the murdered man. The mise-en-scène serves to indicate her qualities of wealth and upper class good taste. The confrontation with Roxy (re)introduces the film's marketing promise of transgressive sexuality. With Roxy, Catherine's bisexuality surfaces in her hostile, "butch" (but classically attractive) "*friend*." Roxy's presence at the house of the victim's sought-after girlfriend throws into question the the mysterious Catherine's sexual proclivities.

CUL. Transgressive Sexuality. Mainstream culture generally offers only the options of deviant/ gay (Roxy) or normal/ straight (Nick): the enigmatic, "inbetween" nature of Catherine's preference adds to her allure and her danger. Homosexuality/ bisexuality is a recurring motif, an underlying anxiety within the film, made most explicit in the club scene. This element was amplified considerably by promotion (the inclusion of Catherine and Roxy dancing in the trailer) in relation to widespread Queer Nation protests around the film.

CUL. Class. Roxy, with her low-brow dress, "unfeminine" demeanour, and colloquial speech, is framed as a "mannish woman," and to some extent as a working class butch. Even as she is compared to and mistaken for Catherine, she is differentiated by class, darker hair colour, and complete hostility toward men/ genuine lesbian-ness. According to prevalent narrative codes, the nexus of class and lesbian

codes earmark Roxy as "expendable" within the narrative. Like Gus, her manner of speech and dress mark her as "innappropriate" within Catherine's jet-setting world.

CUL. "Whiteness". The anomolous Hispanic character marks the prevalence of white yuppiedom in the film and the cycle generally. People of colour are made "invisible" in stereotypical supporting roles. This nameless maid "belongs" in the background of the narrative according to Hollywood convention, but in a broader sense, is even less "appropriate" in Catherine's space than Gus or Roxy.

The Beach House: Meet Catherine Tramell

From the long take on Roxy's face, cut to an aerial shot of the coast highway. Set high above the water, the drive is exhilarating, dangerous. The omnipresent eerie theme music plays on. The car pulls in front of a conspicuously expansive estate with many shiny cars parked out front. An extreme long shot reveals the tiny figures of the detectives in front of the huge house. [CON. insignificance of police, law and order in this world of extreme affluence.] Although this is the middle of the day, the light is strangely grey and filtered, foreboding. A shot from the point of view of the searching detectives zooms past a lurking overhanging cypress branch, to locate Catherine. Dressed in casually expensive white beach robe, she reclines regally in a wicker chair overlooking the edge of a cliff. We hear the sound of the wind, and the waves crashing on the rocks below. To punctuate this first, long-anticipated glimpse of Catherine, there is a sudden surge of minor strains of violin music. [HER. The process of seeking out Catherine Tramell is drawn out to the greatest degree possible to build up suspense.]

Cut to a close up on Nick, looking at her. [CIN. Gendered codes of looking.] He is wearing Clint Eastwood reflector sunglasses. [CUL. "Cool dude detective." Irony. Is this effect a bit overdone? Does he not look like he's trying too hard?] He calls out in a honey voice, "Miss Tramell?"

Close up on Catherine Tramell in profile. She looks coyly over her shoulder, takes a last drag on her cigarette, then flicks it unconcernedly over the cliff. Meanwhile, the foreboding music plays on, fading out only as the dialogue begins. Close up on Nick, who takes off his glasses, to get a better look, and perhaps to be polite. [CON. He increases his vulnerability by removing the eyewear.] Cut to an aerial "surveillance shot" of the detectives approaching Catherine, who doesn't budge as she holds court on the edge of a cliff. Hold on a close up on Catherine, no music. The light is suddenly sparkling and bright. Clad (as throughout the film) in white, with her ultra blonde hair she resembles an angel against the blue, blue sky. [SYM. innocence or the worst kind of guilt disguised as innocence.] The waves crash below and the wind whips her hair. The light is alternately harsh and strangely flickering, as if off a water surface.

Nick: "We're..."

Catherine: (cuts him off) "I know who you are. So how did he die?"

Nick: (soft-peddaling) "He was murdered."

Catherine: (sarcastic) "Obviously. *How* was he murdered?"

Nick: "With an ice pick."

Here, there is a long, weird and unmotivated pause in the conversation, where the camera holds on a medium close up of Catherine, who has a supercilious and inappropriate little grin on her face. The music fades up again.

Nick: "How long were you dating him?"

Catherine: "I wasn't dating him. I was fucking him."

[strange, unmotivated pause]

Gus: (shocked) "What are you, a pro?"

Catherine: (composed) "No, I'm an amateur."

Nick: "How long were you having sex with him?"

Catherine: "About a year and a half."

From this point, the camera zooms closer and closer in on Catherine, seeking to probe her icy depths. [HER. The enigma of Catherine, or sexually-aggressive woman as criminal. CUL. "Speaking sex."]

...

Nick: "Did you leave the club with him?"

Catherine: "Yes."

Nick: "Did you go home with him?"

Catherine: "No. I wasn't in the mood last night" (provocative, directed at Nick)

At this point, there is another pregnant pause in the dialogue as the music fades in once again, accentuating the tense and sexually-charged nature of the exchange. Curran approaches her chair.

Nick: (provocative) "Let me ask you something, Miss Tramell. Are you sorry he's dead?"

Catherine: (narrows her eyes, hostile) "Yeah. I liked fucking him."

Gus: (gets tough) "Listen lady, we can do this downtown."

Catherine: (dismissive, sarcastic) "So read me my rights and arrest me. Otherwise, get the fuck outta here."

She ends the audience in this way, daring them to arrest her. Nick is left standing against the guard rail, hands in pockets. His face is in shadow, framed against the light of the sky and the sea. Characteristically poker-faced, he appears perplexed, intrigued, or disgusted. The scene ends with on a medium long shot of Catherine in profile. Head back and relaxed, she absorbs the afternoon sun with her eyes closed. [CON. Fashion. "American dream" magazine codes of beauty, wealth, style: she has it all. CIN. Star

Codes. Cross-references with Sharon Stone on the cover of every major fashion and entertainment magazine in North America.⁸] Round one: Catherine.

Analysis

HER. This scene forcefully introduces the cold, amoral, drop-dead beautiful Catherine Tramell. In the classic double project of investigating crime, the police officers are brought to investigate the hidden motivations of a beautiful enigmatic woman. [CIN. A common Hitchcock scenario.] While they seek to question her, she actually controls the scene, the setting, the beginning, and the abrupt end of the exchange. This sequence introduces the sexual power play between Catherine and Nick. According to conventions of narrative, every encounter between a man and a woman is a potential romantic match; the *film noir* context makes this tension more precisely a contest — imbued with the knowledge of the sexual crime which preceded the meeting. Every subsequent meeting between Catherine and Nick is a similar battle of wits and glances.

CUL. Gender/ Sexuality. This sequence introduces the literary theme of a discrepancy between surface beauty and inner evil: the duplicity of beautiful women. Catherine is clearly judged as cold and unnatural by Gus because she operates sexually by so-called "male" standards: using men for sex and pleasure. As Nick emerges more and more as a male counterpart to Catherine, Gus remains the only touchstone of the good old American family values. Representing the "good" side of Nick, the part that "has a heart," he is not himself married, and is eliminated by the end of the film.⁹

⁸ See, for example, the 1992 cover stories of Details (April issue: "Sharon Stone: The Face of the Year"); the British Vogue (June issue: "Hot from Hollywood: Sharon Stone"); and Max (October issue: "Sharon Stone: Hollywood Sex").

⁹ J. Hoberman makes a good case for Gus having an unrequited crush on Nick. This theory is supported by his fit of jealousy when Nick reveals that he has "done it" with Catherine: "Goddam sonofabitch you fucked her! How could you fuck her?" See J. Hoberman, "Blood Libel," Village Voice 31 March 1992: 55.

Irony. Moving beyond the sexual mores of such clear interest to the plot, it is appropriate to comment, once again, on the peculiar timing and pacing of this particular scene. The previous buildup to Catherine's entrance; the attention to the details of the setting and the extended duration of what might otherwise be a minor transitional moment all point to the pivotal emotional and hermeneutic weight of this scene. Yet there is something curiously robotic and unfocused in the choppy, elliptical dialogue with its inopportune pauses and omnipresent eerie violin strains. The lines themselves are so punchy and formulaic as to wander over the boundary into the absurd. "Tough-talking detective meets tough-talking broad" is overdone to the point of being a tongue-in-cheek parody of itself: "What are you, a pro?" / "No, I'm an amateur" indeed! Catherine's deadpan and utter lack of affect played against the stonefaced Nick and Gus' suitably shocked "straight man" strains the "suspension of disbelief" demanded by classic realist texts.

CIN. Auteur Codes. Paul Verhoeven, a Dutch director, comes at this deadly serious American realism from a different perspective. Perhaps he doesn't do it quite the same, perhaps he gently pokes fun at the genre as he goes along.¹⁰

SYM. "Whiteness". Catherine's "colour" is white. Throughout the film, she wears white shifts, or off-white outfits which set her apart visually from the darker wardrobes of Nick, Beth, Roxy, and the other characters. The white and neutral tones of the film's settings also functions as a marker of affluence, and of a general trend toward the hermetically-sealed, spacious environs of the "yuppie thriller."

¹⁰ Such moments occur in *RoboCop* (1987) and *Total Recall* (1990) as well: a kind of stylistic excess, a particular rigidity of form, a curious humorous sensibility even in the treatment of heroic icon Schwarzenegger, which threaten to unravel the project from inside. A quality also found in other Northern European directors such as Sirk or Fassbinder, this sensibility is a specific "auteurist" account of the more general postmodern "ironic eclecticism" discussed in the preceding chapter.

Driving Transitions

From the shot of Catherine reclining relaxed and reclining in a beach chair on the cliff by her beach house, cut to the claustrophobic car interior with the two detectives. Gus and Nick exchange glances of complicity and grin. Gus says, "Nice girl."

Cut to a long shot of the coast highway perched precariously high up on the brink of a dry sandy cliff above the ocean. As the car zooms by, the camera holds on the postcard panorama of the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco and the Bay Area in the filtered coastal sunshine. [CUL. California Decadence. The legendary tourist attractions of the area refer to common cultural knowledges of San Francisco as a beautiful and decadent California city, tinged with the dangers of illicit sexuality.]

These transitional driving scenes from the city across the bridge to Catherine's beach house punctuate the film at regular intervals. Their bridging function is marked by the use of the swelling theme music and some dialogue. Brief respites between longer, more intensive dialogue and investigation, they provide "breathing spaces" within the film, and create narrative space for reflection on the unfolding enigmas and action. The police car interior is largely a homo-social space where the "buddy" structure is consolidated. Inside the patrol car, Nick and Gus reaffirm their bond in response to the bewildering array of alluring yet homicidal females surrounding them.

SYM. Class Decadence and Immunity. These scenes also serve to underscore the distance between Catherine's Marin County universe of wealth and prestige, and the grittier workaday world of the police in the city. This apartness and the dizzying and dangerous height of the cliff drive signify Catherine's aloofness to regular codes of sexuality, morality, and law.

CIN. The Car Chase. The recurring high-angle shot of this drive sets up the cinematic convention of high-speed, dangerous car chases — and the ever-present possibility that someone will hurtle to their death over the edge. This expectation is

realized in part when Nick ineffectually tails Catherine in her black sports car. [SYM. Power/ Wealth. Her car, like everything she owns, is faster, and more expensive than his. A dare-devil driver, she out-manoeuvres him on the road, as in conversation and in the bedroom.]

This chase is later echoed when Catherine's black sports car with its unseen driver attempts to run Nick down. In the pursuit that ensues, Nick plays chicken with the unseen driver [HER. Has Catherine's homicidal tendency finally resurfaced?] forcing her off the road. In this final "doubling" between Catherine and her "friend," Roxy (who lacks the panache of her lover in all areas including driving) is conveniently killed off. [CIN/CUL. Lesbian-related death. The only true lesbian character who interferes with the heterosexual coupling is eliminated midway through the film. Suicide, murder, or accidental death of homosexual characters is a common narrative convention in Western film, theatre, and literature.¹¹]

The Three O'Clock: Dr. Beth Garner

As the transitional theme music fades out with the postcard view of the Bay Area, cut to a shot of Nick walking, agitated, through the maze-like corridors of the police station. The building interior is drab, beige and brown, mottled with muted slats of light and shadow. Nick pushes hurriedly through a solid panelled hardwood door with official lettering: "Dr. Elizabeth Garner, Counselling." [CON. Authority. Titles and oak-panelled institutional space. HER. Why does Nick need a counsellor?]

Dr. Garner is framed first from Nick's point of view. [CIN. Gendered codes of looking.] At first her face is not visible, but she turns around coyly to look at Nick. [SYM. Visual doubling. This moment is reminiscent of the first view of Catherine in profile from Nick's point of view, where Catherine also turns to look provocatively at Nick.] There is

¹¹ See the discussion of "Queer Representation" in Chapter 4.

an odd unmotivated pause where the camera holds on her face from Nick's perspective. She is brunette, her face classically round and beautiful, with extraordinarily full, pouting, sensuous lips. She wears glasses with heavy, dark frames. [CON. Intellectual/ "career girl" accoutrement] Shot in close up she asks in a soothing yet patronizing tone, "How *are* you Nick?"

Nick's impatient, explosive demeanour indicates trouble in this patient-counsellor relationship. Beth is framed in her position of authority, behind a huge desk; the venetian blinds over the window behind her emit bars of light and shadow. Her controlling and seductive manner jars against Nick's brusque, sarcastic responses. She asks the questions, engineering the duration and content of the visit, while Nick rages against the imposition of psychiatric counselling. Their session reveals that Nick is struggling to kick drug, cigarette, and alcohol addictions [CUL. Morality. The "good cop" gone crooked] and that Nick and Beth were involved [SYM. Breaching of the sacred counsellor/patient trust]. The specifics of this affair are never revealed in detail, although Nick seems to bear Beth some ill-will.

Analysis

SYM. Psychoanalysis/ Knowledge-Power. The introduction of psychoanalytic discourse here inserts counselling relationships and psychoanalytic "truths" into the hermeneutic code. Most striking within this film, however, is the common problematic positioning of a woman in the power-position of therapist or "expert." What for a man is legitimate knowledge-power becomes manipulation and duplicity in a woman. The following scene reveals that the psychoanalytic expertise of Beth is echoed in Catherine, who graduated *magna cum laudae* from Berkeley, with a double major in psychology and literature. [SYM. Doubling of Beth and Catherine.] Convolutioned, implied, and direct psychological duels between Nick, Catherine, and Beth are vital elements of the

hermeneutic structure of *Basic Instinct*. Ultimately, Beth breaches the sacred doctor-patient trust with their affair, and in passing Nick's confidential personal file to her superior, and possibly to Catherine. Far from "helping" Nick with his problems, this process is part of his undoing. In *Basic Instinct*, Catherine and Beth, both powerful in their psychoanalytic tools to "manipulate" people (specifically, male characters), are ominous and destructive forces to be reckoned with.

CUL. Gender/ Authority. Significantly, this scene ends on an extreme close up of Beth, who has removed her "doctor" glasses in the course of the discussion. This framing of Beth (significantly, not "Dr. Garner") as a beautiful woman with those huge, pouting lips suggests more of a sex goddess than a psychiatrist. Playing with cinematic codings of femininity, the possible authority of the doctor-position is offset by Beth's lack of assertiveness, and her seductive manner.

SYM. Power-Knowledge: The Author. The potential for female scheming and manipulation through superior knowledge is further set up in the next two scenes. We learn that mastermind Catherine Tramell has recently published a book about a murder identical to that of Johnny Boz. Written under the pseudonym Catherine Woolf, the book is titled Love Hurts. [CUL. Irony. Especially given this self-reflexive tendency, are this pen name and absurdly literal title not a trifle heavy-handed, to the point of being laughable?]

SYM. Artifice. The "play within the play" is a common narrative device which foregrounds the problem of distinguishing between "truth" and "fiction"; this element underlines the quality of self-reflexivity suggested by intertextual cultural references and the common use of mirrors. Catherine's next effort after Love Hurts is, appropriately, a chronicle about a police detective who "falls for the wrong woman." With the title Shooter, Catherine informs Nick early on in the film that, like Johnny Boz, she is using him for the prototype of her next ill-fated hero. The book device, paralleling the events

within the narrative, sets up another layer of confusion and foreshadowing within the film.

Expert Consultation: The Pathology of Psychopathic Behaviour

The conclusion to the preceding scene featured a full-screen shot of the inside cover of Catherine's novel. The book's inside cover is printed with a cartoon-like and sensationalist depiction of the twinned book/ diegetic crimes (a man tied to bedposts covered with blood). Cut to a full-screen shot of the bold, bestseller-style cover ("Love Hurts by Catherine Woolf") in Nick's hands. Significantly, the convergence of the *modus operandus* of Catherine's "whodunnit" and Johnny Eoz's murder is discovered by Nick, framed in his own domestic space. [HER. Continues the process of linking the pattern of crimes with Nick as the possible next victim.]

Cut from the book cover to a high angle [CIN. "Surveillance".] shot of a boardroom. All neutral tones of brown, the room is lit with the ubiquitous slats of muted light filtered through venetian blinds. A huge, solid boardroom table fills the room. [CON. Authority.] Seated around the table are Nick, Gus, Lieutenant Walker, Captain Talcott, and an unknown man at the head of the table. [CON. Seat of authority. Papa Freud?] Cut to a medium shot of Beth in the facilitating role, standing to one side of the head of the table. [SYM. Knowledge-Power. She defers to the superior knowledge-power of the "expert."]

Beth: "I've asked Dr. Lamont to consult with us. This isn't really my turf. Dr. Lamont teaches the pathology of psychopathic behaviour at Stanford, and is also a member of the Justice Department psychological profile team. [CON. Knowledge-power. The titles and trappings of expertise.]

Dr. Lamont: "I see two possibilities. One, the person who wrote this book is your murderer and acted out the killing in ritualistic, literal detail. Two,

someone who wants to harm the writer read the book and enacted the killing described to incriminate her."

The doctor is framed in close up, intense and serious with piercing blue eyes. His crisp, erudite speech and slightly disheveled appearance support his authenticity as "absent-minded professor." Throughout the scene, the camera holds on frequent lengthy head and shoulder shots or extreme close ups of Dr. Lamont, who delivers a near monologue of "expert" information. His almost direct address of the camera adds to the seriousness and drama of the moment. Periodically, the camera cuts to close ups and two-shots of the other meeting members, stitching them into the possible scenarios. For example, Nick is most interested in Catherine, the author of the book.

Nick: "What if the writer did it?"

Lamont: "You're dealing with a devious diabolical mind. (Two-shot, Beth and Lamont: seats of authority.) You see, this book had to be written at least six months, maybe even years before it was published. Which means that the writer had to have planned the crime in advance... Now the fact that she carried it out indicates psychopathic obsessive behaviour in terms not only of the killing itself, but in terms of the implied advance defence mechanism."

Gus: "You know, sometimes I can't tell shit from shinola, Doc. What was that you just said?"

Beth: (explanatory, slightly patronizing) "She intended the book to be her alibi."...

Nick: "So what if it's not the writer. What if it's someone who read the book?"

[CIN./HER. Montage. Unmotivated cut to a quick close up of Beth, implicating her visually into this possible scenario.]

Lamont: "You're dealing then with someone so obsessed that he or she is willing to kill an innocent victim in order to place the blame on the person who wrote that book. I'm talking about a deep-seated obsessional hatred and an utter lack of respect for human life."

Cut to a medium shot of Nick. Ghostly violin music fades up in this pause in the dialogue, emphasizing the drama and authority of the Doctor's words.

Gus: (in close up) "So we got a once in a lifetime, top of the line loony-toony the way you cut it. That's what you're saying, right Doc?"

Lamont: (direct address in extreme close up, very grave) "You're dealing with someone very dangerous. And very ill."

Cut to a close up of Nick, who meets the Doctor's gaze. This moment is underscored by a final, thin and tremulous minor chord. Once again, the constant cutting back to Nick in close up links him visually to the criminal scenario, both as investigator and as possible victim.

Analysis

HER. Right. Knowledge-Power. This scene is of key importance in consolidating the role of psychoanalytic discourse in the double investigation of the the murder and Catherine Tramell — the latter hermeneutic quest links up with a broader quest into the "dark continent" of female sexuality and pathology articulated by Freud as "what *do* women want?" The final glance exchanged between Nick and the Doctor indicate a complicity between police and psychologist. This visual cue seeks to re-establish patriarchal control in the hermeneutic code. This culturally-required connection between male good, knowledge, and power is continually at risk or overturned within the text. In contrast with Beth's limited authority established in her own office, her expertise is to a large extent sidelined here, as she defers to the eminently qualified Dr. Lamont.

CUL. Class. Gus' common-sense vocabulary distinguishes him from the scientific discourse, and indicates both his resistance to, and his exclusion from, this psycho-babble. This response also unhinges the doctor's speech from absolute authority, pointing to the overdone, excessively jargon-laden vocabulary employed.

Irony. The framing of the doctor, with long close ups, and particularly extreme close ups, both reinforce the authority of the doctor, and create a tension. The combination of this visual language, the ultra-serious high-sounding scientific monologue, and the extra touch of the music at a dramatic point, push the gravity and drama of the situation almost to an absurd level.

SYM. Psychoanalysis. The almost-cartoonish quality of Dr. Lamont, as well as the double trouble combination of the over-educated expertise and blended ego boundaries of Catherine and Beth contribute to a generalized fascination and play with psychoanalysis within the text. This is furthered by the explicit use of psychoanalytic terms within scenes such as this, as well as the common "Freudian" figures which practically leap out of the film (all those castrating objects; the lesbian who murders her younger brothers with daddy's razor; Catherine's facility with "phallic" objects such as icepicks, sports cars and cigarettes...).¹² In this way, psychoanalytic forms are recurring, sometimes ironic figures which circulate within the text. See Chapters 4 and 5 for a more complete discussion of irony and psychoanalysis and irony in *Basic Instinct* and in the cycle of films as a whole.

¹² As far as the rest of the cycle of films is concerned, one could have a field day pointing out even the most obvious oedipal and Freudian moments. In *Poison Ivy*, Drew Barrymore is a class A nymphomaniac who manages to kill the mother and seduce the father in one fell swoop. In *Body of Evidence*, Madonna has a thing for "father figures" with heart conditions and lots of cash whom she fucks, literally, to death.

The Interrogation Scene

This sequence begins with Catherine, Nick, and Gus' entry into the interrogation room. Typically in the lead, Catherine walks briskly into the room where she is met by Carelli; Walker and Talcott are already inside. We follow Catherine in a medium travelling shot where she visually dominates the frame. Her white dress sets her apart from the drab suits of the officers, and the neutral brown tones of the rest of the room. Framed in a medium shot first from behind, then from in front, Catherine fills most of the frame, where the men's faces peek in from the edges — diminutive, distorted, fragmented. [CIN. The "spider woman" dominates the film's physical and psychological space.] Speaking with Carelli, Catherine, as Nick had predicted, claims she has no wish for an attorney. [CON. Bravado.] Addressing Nick directly, she says (with a small, suggestive smile), "I have nothing to hide."

Catherine then takes up her position "on stage" at the front of the room. In a long shot, she sits on a simple office chair facing the police and the D.A. Behind her is a blue screen which emits a curious bluish light. The rest of the room is neutral tones and brown furniture, lit with fluorescent lights which throw a checkered grid-like pattern of light and dark on the whole room. Catherine is set apart visually and spacially by her seat at the front, and by her white dress, a simple shift with white pumps; her hair is tied back in a bun which is not severe, but chic. Catherine sits with her long bare legs crossed, looking provocatively back at the men, who are seated in a semicircle facing her. [CIN. Spectacle. "Stage" setup. Woman on display as spectacle halting the film's action.] She fumbles for a cigarette. The "no smoking" exchange is indicative of the tone of the rest of the interview, with Catherine orchestrating a series of challenges to various institutional and moral rules (no attorney, suspect sexuality, etc.).¹³

¹³ This dialogue is repeated word-for-word when Nick is questioned about the murder of the Internal Affairs man: an echo suggesting the influence Catherine is gaining over Nick — even as

Carelli: "There is no smoking in this building, Miss Tramell."

Catherine: "What are you going to do, charge me with smoking?"

Catherine in a medium shot, languorously smoking. Cut to a cramped two-shot of Gus and Nick, looking on, and a two-shot of Carelli distorted in the foreground, with Talcott visible behind. The men are shot in wide angle, their faces in close and distorted. The room and the space between bodies is stretched, warped. A panning shot from Catherine's point of view, reveals the men lined up like an audience in front of her, looking at her. [CIN. The Gendered Gaze. Returning their gaze, Catherine appears throughout entirely comfortable with being looked at, manipulating her object-status to her own advantage.]

Carelli: "Would you tell us the nature of your relationship with Mr. Boz?"

Catherine: "I had sex with him for about a year and a half."

The camera zooms in from a medium shot to close up on Catherine, who coolly takes a drag on her cigarette.

Catherine: "I liked having sex with him. He wasn't afraid of experimenting. I like men like that, men who give me pleasure. He gave me *a lot of pleasure*."

Cut to a medium shot of Nick, watching her, then a three-shot of the others, mesmerized. [CUL. Speaking sex. The enigma of women's sexuality: The added enigma of the 1990s "liberated" woman's sexuality.] Catherine smiles back superciliously in close up. Cut to a two-shot of Carelli's distorted fat face in the foreground, and Talcott crammed into the corner of the frame, behind. Carelli, visibly nervous and sweating, leans back and takes off his glasses. [CIN. Does Catherine's challenge to the male gaze

she manipulates him into smoking after he has stated twice to her and once to Beth that he has quit.

defeat Carelli so easily? Has he seen too much already? Could it be that the emperor has no clothes?]

Carelli: "Did you ever, uh, engage in any... sadomasochistic activity?"

Catherine: (leans toward Carelli and into the camera, savouring the moment) "Just exactly what did you have in mind Mr. Carelli?"

Carelli: (ridiculous and uncomfortable) "You ever tie him up?"

Catherine: "No"

Nick: (close up) "You *never* tied him up."

Catherine: (in close up, enjoying the exchange) "No. Johnny liked to use his hands too much. I *like* hands and fingers."

An emphatic pause. The police are flummoxed by her explicit sexual talk. Catherine's presence disrupts this homo-social male-bonding space. Although *they* are questioning *her*, she manipulates the discussion and the spectacle to her advantage. While Catherine seems calm and cool under the interrogation lights, to a man, they look hot and sweaty. Walker gets up to get a glass of water. He is the first of several to do so.

Walker: In your book you describe a white silk scarf.

Catherine: (taking off her jacket, baring her arms, fixes her hair and leans back, getting comfortable) "I've always had a fondness for white silk scarves. They're good for all occasions."

Nick: "But you said you liked men to use their hands..."

Catherine: (sulky, to Nick, eyes glittering in close up) "No, I said I liked *Johnny* to use his hands. I don't make any rules Nick, I go with the flow."

[HER. Catherine consistently singles out Nick from among the men ogling her, addressing him with her most explicit sexual remarks. Has she chosen him to be her lover, or her next victim?]

Carelli, taking the direct approach, leans forward close into the wide angle lens so that his fat, sweating face is distorted in an extreme close up. [CUL. Irony. "The winking image." This shot is commonly included in promotional trailers and clips for the film. The ridicule of Carelli, and all the men in the room is condensed into this full-frame close up. Carelli is completely transfixed by the irrepressible Catherine, who taunts him throughout the questioning period.]

Carelli: "Did you kill Mr. Boz, Miss Tramell?"

Catherine: (leaning toward the camera) "I'd have to be pretty stupid to write a book about killing then go out and kill someone in the exact same way as in my book. I'd be announcing myself as the killer. I'm not stupid."

Talcott: (looking stupid) "We know you're not stupid, Miss Tramell."

As the questioning continues, they move on to the question of drugs. When asked what kind of drugs she used with Johnny Boz, she replies that she used cocaine (the very drug found on the dead body and in the room). Then, to Nick she asks in a honey, insinuating voice, "Have you ever fucked on cocaine, Nick?"

The camera zooms right in on Nick while the theme music fades in for eerie additional "oomph." Cut to a quick close up of Carelli, looking at Nick. Then a tight shot of Catherine's lower body as she uncrosses her legs. A close shot on the nearly hysterical Carelli, his eyes bugging out of his head. Then the same lower body shot as her legs, slightly apart, fleetingly reveal her naked crotch just as she recrosses her long, slender legs. Afterward, she says in a silky voice as she rubs her two smooth and shapely calves together, "It's nice" (meaning fucking on cocaine). A quick close up on Carelli in a reaction shot, sweating, as he exchanges glances with Nick, who looks pale. A travelling shot follows Nick as he crosses the room to fetch water.

Analysis: Multi-Media Event #1

HER. At six minutes, this scene is the longest up to this point in the film. The plot device of questioning actually reveals no information about the crime. Rather than supplying more clues, it is structured as a drawn-out spectacle: a feast of looking at Catherine; her challenging of her manipulation of the male gaze; the returned gaze; the flashing of her privates. Although the hermeneutic crime-solving quest continues beyond this point with many twists and turns, this scene is indicative of how Catherine offers tantalizing red herrings of information (such as the drugs and sexual conduct). [CUL. Speaking Sex: Foucault's "confessional mode."] In the final analysis, however, the clues do not add up to a cohesive and satisfying solution. The progression in both the criminal investigation and the delving into Catherine's psyche or past is always lateral, ineffective, frustrated. Nick and the others are consistently stymied by too many clues which lead nowhere. These crimes offer no solutions, although we know the identity of the murderer all along. Unlike the Hitchcock model which in one move solves the mystery of the woman and the crime, *Basic Instinct* refuses the certitude and satisfaction of closure in its perverse and open-ended resolution.

This sequence further develops Catherine's seductive, smart-talking, and coldly amoral character. It helps build sexual tension as well as complicity/ antipathy between Nick and Catherine, as she constantly singles him out, taunting him with her inexplicable and intimate knowledge of his past. Nick's pure fascination with Catherine is a key narrative element which propels him (against his better judgement) into the unimaginably "dangerous" situations required by the suspense genre. A slippery fish, Catherine's power to attract is presented by her seductive body language and insinuating, smooth lines. [CON. The blonde dynamo. Sex, unimaginable pleasure and danger.]

CUL. Spectacle. The "flashing of pussy" gesture is a dense, complicated moment. The drama of this moment is further heightened by its prominent place in the

film's promotional machinery, which amplify it to the stature of "media event." The arrangement of the room with Catherine on display heightens the theatrical quality of the scene. Such a "taboo" sight effectively halts the narrative for a "pregnant moment" of fascination and shock.

SYM. Castration. The sight of the "wound," according to Freud, is the dreaded moment which evokes the greatest anxiety in men. Catherine uses this exhibition to derail the discussion, to unnerve the men in the room. Although Freud was clear about what he thought "castration" meant for men, we can only speculate on its possible significance for women. The obvious evocation of castration, not to mention Catherine's "balls" of sexual bravado move, once again, "over the top."

CUL. Flashers. According to gendered codes of cinematic spectacle, women's bodies have provided the standard fare for the voyeur.¹⁴ This object-status is seen by feminist film theory as essentially disempowering. The gesture of "flashing" genitals as a shocking act within a sexual power play has been reserved for men. Women's genitals are coded as taboo, shameful, certainly not seats of power. CIN. Pussy shots. Within the conventions of pornography, on the other hand, the repressed realm of women's genitals surfaces with a considerable interest payed to the pussy or the "split beaver." Although the shot in *Basic Instinct* is very brief and barely visible, it evokes a crossing of the line between "mainstream" (sanctioned) entertainment and pornography. This contentious strategy is central to the film's marketing strategy, which operates through the saleability of transgressive sexuality and forbidden pictures.

CUL. Exposure. The production of a multi-media spectacle of a woman flashing her privates voluntarily as a calculated strategy raises many conflicting cultural and affective associations. Exposure of the forbidden women's genitals is both a moment of

¹⁴ In contemporary cinema and other media, the male body functions increasingly as sexual commodity.

high drama and irony in the gendered power play of the film, and simultaneously an evocation of the vulnerability associated with such a posture.¹⁵ Western visual and other cultural codes frame "pussy" as tainted and not-to-be-represented, except in particular pornographic scenarios. Such scenarios are generally framed as derogatory and dangerous for women. Both in conventional narrative and to some extent in day-to-day experience, the exhibition of such provocative transgressive sexuality is almost inevitably followed by violent and swift reprisal in the form of denigrating comments, bad reputation, attack and rape. The power and vulnerability of women's of sexuality hangs in the balance here, and the scene is particularly evocative because Catherine seems to retain control of the situation throughout.¹⁶

"Date Rape"

Catherine induces Nick to drive her home. Sealed inside the car with a dramatic downpour outside in the night city [CIN. *Film Noir Motif*. Troubled weather patterns as an index of disequilibrium within the film] their tense and sexually-charged exchange continues. She challenges him, teases him, frustrates him at every turn. She seems to know an inordinate amount about him [HER. How does she know so much?] but all that he knows of her is official police data — and that she wears no underwear. After this drive, Nick meets the other officers at a bar, and falls off the wagon in a big way, ordering doubles of bourbon. He gets into a hostile, violent scrap with Neilson from Internal Affairs. [HER. Sets up his public conflict with Neilson, and Nick's later framing

¹⁵ Critics of the film (particularly Queer Nation) tend to explain all elements in the film as "exploitation," pure and simple. There is more than a grain of truth to this argument in this case.

¹⁶ In an interview on the *Barbara Walters Special*, Sharon Stone recounts how she was tricked by Verhoeven into unknowingly playing this scene. This manipulation made her feel betrayed by the director. Whether you believe her or not, this anecdote demonstrates how contingent the seeming sexual power of women can be, the tenuousness of Catherine's seeming invulnerability outside the specific context of *Basic Instinct*.

for the man's murder] The ever-solicitous Beth arrives in the nick of time to calm him down. They leave the bar together.

When they arrive at Beth's apartment, Nick gets rough. He rips Beth's blouse open, forces her down on the couch, and sodomizes her. Although she seems to respond to him at this time, afterward she expresses anger and throws him out of her apartment. Beth attributes his behaviour to his contact with Catherine: "You've never been like that before. It's *her*, isn't it?" [HER What is Beth's connection to Catherine? Is her anger with Nick based in jealousy?]

Analysis

The "date rape" sequence (as it came to be known through the Queer Nation protests) has considerable significance both within the text, and more generally in relation to discourses around violence and sexuality. One of the more disturbing and most explicitly "violent" scenes, it operates on various discursive levels.

CUL. Consent. It is unclear whether or not Beth consents to this act. While the exchange is uncommonly "rough" for mainstream film, in the end she seems to perhaps enjoy it. [Myth. Women secretly enjoy being taken by force.] The issue of "consent" articulates with recent high-profile American "rape" cases (notably William Kennedy-Smith and Mike Tyson), and with general public discourses around date rape and violence against women. Yet ultimately the film is unconcerned about Beth's consent. The scene operates within the narrative as an index of Nick's character transformation under Catherine's influence.

CUL. (A)morality. The preceding interrogation sequence with its play on cigarettes and risqué sex as well as Nick's return to the bottle, convey that Catherine is a "bad influence" on Nick. She seems to intentionally bring him closer to his former self-destructive, violent, substance-abusing ways. By sodomizing Beth [CON Transgressive

Sexuality. Sodomy is perceived to be a homosexual (male) practice.] in a seeming non-consensual moment, Nick makes a clear choice as he did with cigarettes and booze. This act throws Nick's presumed "normal" sexuality into question, as evidence of the further deterioration of his good character attributable to Catherine. Perhaps this reveals his "true self," or merely the part most like Catherine [SYM. Doubling]. Within the moral ambiguity of the *noir* universe, none of the characters provide any guarantee of morality.

CIN. Noir Female Roles. Conventionally, *film noir* offers the hero a choice between the "good" wife type, and the evil, scheming *femme fatale*: often they are distinguishable by hair colour.¹⁷ This pattern can be seen throughout all of the films of the cycle. Beth Garner, the questionable yet still "good Doctor" seems to offer the only positive influence, "normal" sex, perhaps a relationship. However, as the plot unravels, Beth's "good" status is thrown into question, and she is revealed to be like Catherine and the other women characters — her past similarly littered with suspect sexual encounters, and the bodies of dead men.

CUL. Irony. According to the terrain sketched out by this film, it would seem that all women are potentially lesbians, bisexual, and/or murderers of men.

SYM. The Interchangeability of Women. According to Lévi-Strauss' notion of the exchange of women, there is an equivalency established among the female characters of *Basic Instinct*. They are all equally under suspicion for the murder of male loved ones. Similarly, the constant play of doubling, tripling, and mistaken identities creates considerable confusion in the criminal investigation. In this sequence, the almost literal interchangeability of the bodies of the female characters is played out. Nick, frustrated and turned on by the elusive Catherine, takes out his aggressions in the next sequence on the body of Beth. In a strange twist, Catherine's aggressive sexual projections and

¹⁷ This pattern can be seen in *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* with the blonde DeMornay pitted against the brunette Sciorra. Also, in *Poison Ivy*, the emotionally-bonded teenagers are ultimately antagonistic, and distinguished by hair colour.

manipulation are seen as the "cause" or impetus for Nick's heightened aggressivity and abnormal sexual act.

SYM. Ego Boundaries and Pathology. The common figure of doubling played out in *Basic Instinct* and other films of the cycle points to a psychoanalytic cliché around female bonding, lesbianism, and criminal pathology. Beth and Catherine's unexplained one-way or mutual obsession can be related in part to widely-circulating Freudian theories of developmental female sexuality:¹⁸ With the mother as her initial love-object, the female child functions firstly in the blurred realm of female bonding; in order to reach her designated love-object of the father/man, she must break out of her "immature," undifferentiated female relationships. Thus, characteristically, lesbian attraction is constructed as undifferentiated, claustrophobic — and often the cause of jealous, psychopathic behaviour.¹⁹

The Club Scene

When Nick informs Catherine that he will continue to tail her even after his suspension, she informs him that she will be at Johnny Boz's club that night. Cut to the heavy beat of loud and constant house music. A dark and cavernous nightclub with a waist-level shot of a forest of legs and torsos gyrating to the beat. The camera flies rapidly up above the bobbing heads to reveal a huge, hybrid gothic space, with vaulted cathedral ceilings — its arches and columns outlined in pink and blue neon. A solar system of flashing white spotlights are mounted on the ceiling, providing a throbbing quality of light which plays over the mass of dancing bodies. The dim corners are lit with

¹⁸ See, for example, Sigmund Freud, "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" and "Female Sexuality" The Pelican Freud Library Volume 7: On Sexuality.

¹⁹ This claustrophobic obsessive female bonding is a common feature within the cycle of films. While not always explicitly sexual, the pathology of the criminal is often linked to an unhealthy desire to become like her friend (*Single White Female*) or taking it one further, to replace her in the affections of her husband, father, pets, or children (*Poison Ivy*, *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, *Fatal Attraction*).

stands of candle fixtures. [CIN. Gothic Set. Gothic décor connotes mystery, intrigue, danger, but with a neon twist — a pastiche of pink and blue which collides strangely with the churchlike, dark space. Serious and not-serious.]

The restless camera travels over the heads of the crowd, lighting on Nick. Clad in an ugly green V-neck sweater and stiff, tight new blue jeans, Nick looks old, square, out of place, his body strangely static and stiff amongst the revellers. From Nick's point of view, the camera singles Roxy out of the crowd. Dirty blonde hair piled high on her head, she wears a clingy blouse with almost no front to it. Although her dress is explicitly sexy and female, something about her bold, energetic dancing and the intent, cold expression on her face undercuts the "feminine" quality of her attire. She dances up close with another darker woman with spiked hair. With an intimate caress on the cheek, Roxy leaves to make her way through the crowd. Unobserved, Nick follows her through the mass of energetic bodies, the camera trailing her from his point of view. With the bangs from her bouffant hairdo falling in her eye facing the camera and Nick, she is unaware of his gaze [CIN. Voyeurism/ Woman-as-Spectacle.]

Roxy strides through a heavy swinging door marked "Men" in bold letters. Nick follows her into the ungendered, many-splendoured bathroom. [CIN. Western Genre. The swinging door is reminiscent of a Western saloon scene, the "men" sign on the door marking off an essentially male space. Roxy's assertive and butch demeanour situates her somewhere between the genders.] The camera scans the crowded bathroom scene from Nick's perspective: On the left, two people of indeterminate gender and mohawk hairstyle french kiss. [CON. Transgressive Sexuality. Polymorphous perversity.] Roxy, who we now see is wearing a tight micro-mini skirt and knee-high shiny black boots, sidles up to Catherine in a bathroom stall, breathing out a husky "Hi."

Seated on a toilet seat facing Nick, Catherine is just finishing a line of coke offered her by a muscular black man with cropped hair, wearing only a singlet and gold

earrings. [CON. Blackness. Otherwise so rare in this film, connotes heightened sexuality, decadence and drugs. Like a Benetton ad, his blue-black skin is a dramatic, almost aesthetic, contrast to Catherine's ultra-whiteness.] According to this context, his wardrobe and smooth body language, the man's sexuality is indeterminate, perhaps gay.²⁰ Her hair tied up on her head like Roxy's [SYM. Doubling] and wearing a slinky gold lamé gown, Catherine's body is partly entwined with the black man. Roxy straddles Catherine's lap, facing her. As Roxy leans intimately over to the man to take a snort of cocaine, Catherine provocatively meets Nick's open, hostile and aroused stare. Lit from above, her face angled down and her eyebrows darkened, she exudes cat-like sensuality, evil and alluring.²¹ The movements of the threesome are fluid, familiar, in time with the heavy house beat. Hold on a close up of Nick, stock-still, staring.

With a half-smile, Catherine returns his stare, head craned around Roxy's body cradled on her lap. She reaches a long, shapely white leg across the stall, and decisively kicks the door shut with a loud, echoing slam. Cut to black.

A quick cut to a claustrophobic medium shot of Catherine and Roxy dancing exuberantly with the unnamed black man. They are surrounded by a mob of flailing arms and legs. The loud house music does not skip a beat, but here a slow melody line of synthesized treble music (echoing the extra-diegetic violin music employed elsewhere) supplements the basic base and drum tracks. Adding a subtle quality of heightened drama, this treble line continues throughout the rest of the club scene.

In a low angle long shot, we locate Nick alone in the dynamic crowd, standing stiff and pulling on a drink, his gaze directed off-screen. Over his shoulder, we see two

²⁰ According to J. Hoberman, this scene was shot in a well-known Los Angeles gay club: as an intertextual reference for "those in the know."

²¹ This same expression features prominently in the film's publicity, both through clips of this exact sequence, and in the common publicity still. In this still, Douglas and Stone are entwined in a torso shot. Douglas has his back to the camera, while Stone stares directly into the camera, her long fingernails resting threateningly on his bare back.

club dancers up on a stage, wearing garters and leather, and little else. [CON. Transgressive Sexuality.] Cut to a tight two-shot of Roxy and Catherine dancing close and intimate, swaying slowly to the music. They look almost identical with their low-cut party wear, piled-up blondish hair, dangling earrings. Catherine takes Roxy's face in her hands and kisses her (without much enthusiasm). Cut to a close up of Nick approaching the camera, staring head-on, a stony expression on his face. [CIN/ CUL. Lesbians in Straight Porn. Identical, "straight"-looking women displayed for the male gaze.]

Catherine and Roxy intertwined in extreme close up. First Catherine, then Roxy, turn to meet Nick's gaze. Catherine is teasing, a slight smile playing at her lips, while Roxy is sullen, already pulling away. Catherine presses her back against Roxy, moving to the beat. Cut to a long shot from Nick's point of view as he watches Catherine and Roxy dance, bodies pressed tight together, both returning his stare. Roxy fondles Catherine's breasts from behind. As the camera zooms in with Nick's approach, Roxy melts into the background, and Catherine sidles up to dance close to the rigid Nick. This switch is marked by the addition of a track of dynamic bongo rhythm to the building soundtrack. Roxy, abandoned, gestures angrily with her hand, grunting "Bah!" From Roxy's point of view, a long-shot of Nick and Catherine dancing, Catherine's back to her.

Close in, Nick tries forcefully to kiss Catherine, but she spins away, laughing. He freezes, his face hard and set. Catherine approaches him, and the camera cuts to a pelvic close up as she presses her rounded short-skirted bum against Nick's tight-pants crotch. She rubs against him, his hand hanging limply beside her. Now, from Roxy's point of view, the scenario reversed, with Catherine pressed up against Nick, looking back at Roxy. Nick, behind her, in shadow, looks on (threatened or triumphant?) from over her shoulder. This is a show-down, or a strange sexual game between the two women, with Nick both central and sidelined. Roxy dances frenetically side-to-side, in a kind of peek-a-boo with the black man whose back is to the others, her face furious.

There is a curious lack of emotion expressed in this elaborate dance of seduction and betrayal. Throughout the film, the actors are stiff and hollow at seemingly passionate moments.

Catherine turns playfully to Nick with a winning sigh. Cut to his now-virile hand greedily, masterfully grabbing her short-skirted bum, forcing her body against his. [CUL. Bum-pinching, ass-grabbing: done by men to women, who are seen to provoke it.] She moans in pleased surprise. [SYM. Virility. The "real man" takes charge.] The camera zooms in closer and closer on them kissing, isolating their passion and cutting out the extraneous surrounding movement. The treble synthesizer theme, in crescendo, contributes to pull them into each other, and out of the frenetic club environment. In a long shot from Roxy's point of view, we see them making out, Catherine's back to Roxy, as she claws lustily at Nick's shirt to get at his neck and body.

Analysis: Multi-Media Event #2

HER. This return to Johnny Boz's club and the pickup echo both Catherine's self-avowed interest in Nick as the character for her next book — and her relationship with Johnny Boz (more specifically the sequence of events of the night of the murder). This structural repetition creates a tension, as the subsequent sex scene threatens to immediately replay the film's opening moments. The loud music is of key importance in establishing the excitement and decadence of the club, while building the sexual tension and anticipation to a high pitch as prelude to the sex scene which follows.

CUL. Speaking and Selling Sex. The affective and meaning-dense power of this scene is partly produced by its key place in the film's publicity packaging. The club's counterculture quality, and the "perverse" love triangle help construct a "narrative image" around illicit sexuality. Significantly, this, the most forthright and sensual "lesbian"

interaction is trotted out for advance publicity. But it is pretty pale stuff in relation to the heterosexual sex scenes which pepper the film.

CIN. Spectacle. The club sequence is the scene most centrally bound up with the cinematic convention of show-stopping spectacle. The club's exotic, drug-saturated, throbbing counterculture sexuality provides an exciting backdrop for the development of the competition between Nick and Roxy for Catherine's attentions, and for Catherine's exhibitionist foreplay of one lover against another.

CIN. The Gendered Gaze. Once again, this scene is obsessed with the dynamics of the male gaze, and the challenge presented by a returned female gaze. This tension, present throughout the text, is perhaps made most explicit, and most highly dramatic within this sequence. The matched stares of Catherine, Nick, and Roxy in various combinations are accentuated by their frequency, duration, and intensity. Catherine's gesture of kicking the bathroom stall door closed is a moment which resonates both within the text and within the trailer material as both a tease and an explicit refusal of the male gaze.

While the camera most often takes Nick's point of view, his greedy and excessive voyeurism is offset by Catherine's obvious awareness and manipulation of his gaze. In this sequence, as in the interrogation scene, the centrality of the male gaze is seemingly outmanoeuvred by Catherine's counter-deployment of her object status. The accentuated, foregrounded male gaze is no longer the dominant structural element implied by much feminist film criticism. It becomes rather a mere evidence of male sexual slavery to the domineering and familiar *femme fatale* or fatal femme. The high-powered manipulation of men by beautiful, scheming women is by no means new to *film noir*, but the head-on challenging gaze directly into the camera and the spectator is a self-conscious strategy which complicates the stakes of looking relations.

CIN. Pornography. Clearly, the implied omnipotence of the all-seeing and all-knowing Catherine is a central formal narrative element which gives her the upper hand in her contest with Nick. Her "come hither look" which features so prominently in the film's promotional materials is common to the naughty, hypersexual come-on of pornographic convention. This crossover relativizes and re-contextualizes her seeming domination of the men within the film. The looking relations of *Basic Instinct* are served up in the name of cash dollars. And the transgressive and show-stopping quality of an assertive female gaze is partially contained into another provocative commodity item not much different from so many others.

CUL. Transgressive Sexuality. The gender battle is complicated, the stakes raised, by the element of a butch lesbian competing with macho male heterosexual for Catherine's attentions. The setting of the club's in-your-face gyrating polymorphous perversity, and the important presence of Roxy complicate the presumed-heterosexual relations of looking so common to feminist film theory. The exchanged sexualized female gaze between Catherine and Roxy provides a riveting moment of potentially transgressive spectacle. Yet this moment is constantly threatened and ultimately overturned by its framing within the pornographic convention of "lipstick" lesbians displayed for the male gaze. While Catherine's gesture of kicking shut the door in Nick's face is an explicit refusal of his voyeurism, her eventual choice of Nick as a partner relegates her moments of intimacy with Roxy to the conventional place of foreplay before the "real thing."

Hot Sex and a Brush with Death

From the throbbing house music with its frenetic body activity, cut directly back to the sensual and languorous violin theme music. We see Catherine's face in profile as she falls back on a bed, pulling Nick on top of her. From this quiet intimate moment, we

are pulled back to an establishing shot which reveals a monochromatic, spacious, almost generic room with a large bed. The white curtains in the open windows flutter in the breeze. Nick, splayed on top of Catherine on the huge bed, is pantless, looking slightly exposed. He pulls off his shirt, and with his mouth and hands works his way down Catherine's body. Over the music, we hear their slight moans and heavy breathing.

In the quickest orgasm from cunnilingus ever, Catherine arches her back in pleasure, outlining her hard, toned body with its taught belly and small breasts. [HER. Slowly building tension, this shot is reminiscent of the murderess arching backward in the opening sequence, the first of a set of explicit echoes from the murder scene.]

She draws him back up to her mouth, and rolls their bodies over decisively, like a wrestler. [CON. Athletic Sexual Prowess.] Quickly, catlike, she is on top of him. As she goes down on him, he watches her anxiously from his prone position, then lets his head fall back on the pillow. The camera follows his gaze up the wall, in a reverse trajectory of the long tilt of the opening sequence. Nick finds himself looking into a ceiling mirror, the explicit parallel with the scene of the crime. The camera swims up into the mirror, which reveals a bird's eye view of their bodies on the bed, Catherine hovering over Nick's lower torso.

Cut to a reaction shot of Nick in close up, moaning in pleasure and fear as she goes down on him. He nervously cranes his neck up again to watch what she is doing down there. [SYM. Castration Anxiety.] Catherine meets his gaze, her face sensual, yet oddly blank and unreadable. She swoops back up his body, her face obscured by a mass of tousled blonde hair echoing the hair-obscured face of the murderess. [CON Disguise.] Nick rolls them over, setting himself back on top, forcefully, using his bulk and muscle. Close in, we see his intent, cruel expression as he holds her hands down over her head, and pushes into her hard, with a grunt. She moans, closing her eyes. Breathing heavier jerking back and forth, faster and faster, the music is in crescendo.

Cut to a closeup of Catherine in the throes of passion, holding on hard to the bars at the head of the bed, mouth open, moaning louder and louder. Just as they seem to be coming, she scores Nick's back deeply with all the fingernails of both hands, leaving bloody gouges in his skin. Nick gasps in pain and surprise all mingled with intense pleasure. [CUL. Transgressive Sexuality. The fine line between pleasure and pain.²²]

A moment of a pause registers the shock, *coitus interruptus*. Catherine rolls back over on top of Nick, her perfectly-toned athletic body crouched over him. Through the bars at the head of the bed [CIN. Film noir Visual Motif. The same shot as in the opening sequence.] we see her in close up, her hair falling about her face. She is flushed, her face cruel and exhilarated. In profile, close in, we see him try to push his way up to a sitting position, kissing her breasts. Slowly, powerfully, she pushes him back down, now holding his hands down, calming him, "Shhhh." As the camera holds on his fascinated and terrified face, she holds him down firmly, and reaches under the pillow for.... a white silk scarf. This revelation is accentuated with the deep, ominous, minor chord in the music, which plays on relentlessly.

The camera zooms in closer and closer, with quick editing of matched closeups. She systematically ties his hands to the bedstead, with a soft "whoosh" of the scarf fabric. Nick, like Johnny Boz in the opening scene, is caught, passive. He can only wait and watch her movements with alarm, and accept the pleasure she delivers. Slowly, deliberately, she rides him to climax, surging hard and forceful, back and forth. At the moment of orgasm, she arches wildly way back. Cut to her hand reaching back over the covers, seeming to search for something... She then lurches violently forward, landing on his torso. Hold on a close up of her shoulder obscuring his body. Did she stab him?

²² The injury to the male partner in the throes of passion, the pain/pleasure threshold, is repeated explicitly in *Body of Evidence*, where Madonna fucks Wilhem Dafoe on the hood of a car, grinding his back into broken glass.

Pulling away from the intensity of the moment, she sits up, drawing him to her in an unprecedented moment of tenderness. Yet, framed from behind Nick's back, the camera zooms in on her crazed, wild-eyed, exhilarated face. She shudders in the aftermath of spent passion. Or is it homicidal lust?

Analysis

HER. This scene makes more explicit the repetition of Johnny Boz's last night, from the club scene onward, the structure of parallel events serves to feed the expectation of another murder. The tease, the tension, is in the buildup, rather than in any actual violence. The tension of this scene is drawn almost entirely from its literal shot-by-shot repetition of the opening sequence. The agonizing questions, "did she?"/ "will she...?" are drawn out the length of the long sex scene, through no less than three orgasms. Only to be put off after their subsequent embrace, until the next time. While the scene creates a high level of anxiety and anticipation, it brings the criminal investigation no closer to a solution.

CUL. Transgressive Sexuality. The heightened level of fear and pleasure described by Nick's responses plays out the link between fear, pleasure, and pain. Within this film and *Body of Evidence*, the ultimate orgasm is death. Fear is the turn-on. The forbidden moments and power play only add to the tension. Watching Catherine repeat the intricate details of the crime, Nick is mesmerized by fear, yet cannot help collaborating in her drama.

CUL. Gendered Power Play. The literal flip-flop between top and bottom in this sequence plays out the symbolic power play between Nick and Catherine. Their lovemaking is ritualized, in matched positions and motions. Yet the narrative device of Catherine's new book, as well as the formal setup of the scene as an echo of the initial murder, frame Catherine as the initiator and controller of the scene. Although Nick tries

to get the upper hand with brute force, she eventually, inevitably, ends up on top. She continues to control the sex, stopping him just at the point of orgasm, then finally ties him up and forcefully fucks him in her own good time.

CUL. Male Performance Anxiety. The broader social implications of the ongoing sexual power play are made even more explicit in their discussion the next day. Nick feels that she was "the fuck of the century," while Catherine maintains less enthusiastically that "it wasn't a bad start."²³ CUL. Irony. This type of overblown, dialogue reinforces the ironic sensibility which can be read continually off the very flat surface texture of the film.

Nick and Roxy: The Showdown

In a brief but important confrontation after the sex scene, Nick goes to the washroom, naked, to get a drink of water. As he straightens up from the sink, he is startled by the image of Roxy behind him, reflected in the mirror. Staring at him, hostile, her face is like marble (as she is pictured throughout the film). [CON. Stone-Butch.] She has a black motorcycle jacket pulled over her club clothes, a kind of tough shell over the more revealing, "femme" mini-skirt and low-cut blouse. Her tough apparel contrasts with Nick's sagging nakedness [CUL. The Nude. According to dominant codes of visual representation, women are often pictured as nude and vulnerable next to appraising, fully-clad men.]

Roxy: (deadpan) "If you don't leave her alone, I'll kill you."

Nick: (drying his face) "Let me ask you something, Rocky. I think she's the fuck of the century. What do *you* think?"

²³ In an interview with Details magazine, Sharon Stone remarks ironically about the sexual element in *Basic Instinct*: "I see her (Catherine) as asexual, someone who uses sex as currency to get what she wants. Listen, I have a four-minute sex scene with Michael Douglas in which I have three orgasms. What does that tell you?" (Kent Black, "Hot Stuff," Details April 1992: 78.)

Roxy, in close up, looking murderous, moves closer to Nick. In an intense profile two-shot, they are framed nose to nose, in a standoff. He is slightly taller than her. There is, significantly, no music. They whisper menacingly in the silence, as an homage to the contested love-object, Catherine, asleep in the next room.

Nick: "How long have you been here?... You like watching, don't you?"

Roxy: "She *likes* me to watch."

CUL. Gender Power Play. Although Nick has won the battle, getting Catherine in the sack, he may have lost the war. This final exchange places the seemingly-defeated Roxy in a position of slight advantage, as the long-term lover. More than anything, however, it shifts the focus back to the omnipotent Catherine, who seems to orchestrate and manipulate people to her advantage, playing Roxy off against Nick.

CIN. The Gaze. According to the conventions of pornography, lesbian sexuality is framed for the pleasure of the male voyeur. Yet here, the lesbian lover watches the heterosexual sex act. This dynamic is further complicated by the fact that the woman watching is "butch" — not a "real" woman. But if Roxy is the implied viewer, she seems to be a disempowered and jealous one.

CUL. Lesbianism/ Bisexuality. In contrast with her more emotional and long-term implied connection to Roxy, Catherine's emphatic statement that she only fucks men for pleasure establishes a potentially high level of complicity between the two women. This possibility, however, is never represented in the film except in the bizarre club scene with its one explicit kiss — seemingly all framed for Nick's benefit. As the plot winds itself out, the possibility of their relationship is ruled out: first by the unlikely suggestion that Catherine may have fallen for Nick, and secondly by Roxy's formulaic death.²⁴

²⁴ In Hollywood film, this predictable little drama is played out wherever there is a whisper of a lesbian dynamic. See, for example, *The Children's Hour* (1962), *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), *Personal Best* (1982). See Chapter 4 for a more complete discussion of Hollywood conventions of "Queer Representation."

CUL. Artifice. The complex receding horizon of layered gazes as demonstrated by this scene rules out the possibility for a definitive "winner" in the gendered power play. *Basic Instinct* can be described neither as an essentially "progressive feminist text," nor as a purely exploitative, stereotypical one. A more relevant angle of approach to this text is through its postmodern ironic and amorally provocative quality.

Intermezzo

As the investigation progresses, Nick's suspicions about Catherine increase. At one point when he returns to his apartment, he finds her there waiting for him. [HER. The almost omniscient capacity of Catherine to be everywhere at once. Undaunted by locks, she moves freely into his personal space.] He plays it cool, aloof. She taunts him with her breasts.

Nick: "I've seen them before."

Catherine: "Well, this may be your last chance to see them again. My book's almost finished. My detective is almost dead."

Nick: (moving towards her) "Do I have time for a last cigarette?"

Catherine: "Afterwards."

(They make out, fiercely.)

Fade to a later, romantic scene, complete with soft piano music. Nick and Catherine are entwined, naked, on the window ledge. Through the venetian blind, the night city can be seen. Nick smokes a cigarette. They seem for the first time familiar, intimate, relaxed together. [CON. Romance. Happy endings. Male-female complicity: a rare and unsustainable moment in this cynical text.]

Nick: "I have to do some research tomorrow."

Catherine: "I'm good at research. What are you researching?"

Nick: (taking a drag on his cigarette) "A new ending for your book."

Catherine: (laughs) "Oh really. What's the twist?"

Nick: "The detective falls for the wrong girl. But he doesn't die."

Catherine: "So what happens to them?"

Nick: "They fuck like minks, raise rugrats, and live happily ever after."

Catherine: (suddenly serious, direct into the camera in close up) "It won't sell."

Nick: (laughs) "Why not?"

Catherine: (rolls over, so we see her perfect aquiline nose in profile)
"Somebody has to die."

Nick: (serious) "Why?"

Catherine: (ominous, with a small, matter-of-fact smile) "Somebody always does."

HER. This scene exemplifies the straightforward buildup created by the novel device. In spite of all the complicated twists of the plot, *Basic Instinct* follows with considerable precision the cues given by Catherine. Not striking blindly or without warning, she is straightforward with Nick, giving him every chance to get away. Yet the simplicity and obviousness of the setup is somehow disarming. Nick and the audience await an unexpected outcome, a surprise ending.

SYM. Power/ Authorship. The device of the writerly subplot foregrounds the whole question of control and naming. Catherine's power as an author means that, both symbolically and at the level of action, she seems to control the machine of representation. She often addresses Nick as a "character" whom she knows better than he knows himself. He becomes her creation, and she manipulates him accordingly, even staging his death. While this "tough cop" has every warning, he seems powerless to react, or even to prevent the murders which happen under his very nose. His survival at

the end of the film is not due to any act on his part, but rather to a seeming dysfunction in the well-oiled machinery of Catherine's heretofore perfectly executed plot.

CUL. Artifice. The self-reflexive "play within a play" foregrounds the film's artifice. In terms of gender and power, although Catherine seems to hold all the cards, she is also the carefully-constructed projection of a writer,²⁵ of a director, of the entire Hollywood production machine.

The Brush-Off

The film's doubled romantic intrigue and detective plot are wound up together in the film's last few breathless scenes. Nick discovers that with a discrete change in identity, Beth has covered up her shady past (which includes a brief affair with Catherine in college, and a husband icepicked to death). Convinced that Beth, not Catherine, is the perpetrator, Nick bounces into Catherine's house, like a frisky schoolboy. When he arrives, she is not immediately visible, but the computer is busily printing out what seems to be the manuscript of her new book. The only sound in the quiet, bright room is the insistent trill of the printer, which seems, ominously, to operate almost of its own accord. The mid-afternoon sunlight flickers eerily through the room, as if reflected off water. Here, the slow, sustained, haunting minor chords of music fade in.

After calling enthusiastically for Catherine, Nick peruses the mock-up for Shooter the book, by Catherine Woolf. [SYM. Story within a Story. Near completion.] As he leans down to look at the computer printout, we see only part of the page with the edges cut off: "...Shooter raced into the.../...ed button for the.../...his partner's dead body.../...legs sticking out...." [HER. Explicit foreshadowing of Gus' murder.]

²⁵ The role of Joe Esterhas, the film's writer, is an instrumental component of the film's "commercial intertext." Advance publicity gasped at the \$3 million dollar price tag on the script. Also, the media followed in some detail the writer's flirtation with Queer Nation protesters who claimed that the script promulgated negative stereotypes of lesbians, bisexuals, and women generally.

While the camera holds on a medium shot of Nick leaning over the printer, Catherine can be seen over his shoulder as she floats silently into the room from the stairway behind him. He embraces her affectionately, but she brushes him off. She has a curious, set, cold expression, as if in a trance. She explains, once again, that the book is finished (same ending) and bids him goodbye. As they argue, Catherine harshly rips the computer printout sheets apart. Nick yells in disbelief, "Is this some kind of *game* we're playing here?" Catherine replies humourlessly, "The games are over, Nick."

This exchange is interrupted by Hazel Carby who also appears mysteriously from upstairs. [CIN. Negative space. She is preceded by her voice, off-screen. The sudden unmotivated appearance of characters into the diegesis is unsettling, a common feature of *film noir*.] [HER. What is her connection to Catherine? What were they doing up there?] Hazel, a well-dressed middle-aged woman with coiffed blonde hair, emerges from the stairwell and simply stands there, smiling slightly at Nick. An older, blonde woman, Hazel could be Catherine's mother-figure "protecting" her from Nick's wrath. She is also, more figuratively, an older version of the blonde "fatal femme" who kills the men close to her. As Catherine passes Hazel to ascend the stairs, Hazel nods politely at Nick, then follows her up the stairs. He is dismissed.

HER. At the very point where Nick is convinced of Catherine's innocence, she seems to confirm her guilt and her intent to finish the relationship as stated. The tension between fiction and action sets up a complex set of expectations. She has Nick wrapped around her little finger. He is unable to read the writing on the...printer.

CUL. Female Pathology. Catherine's "friend," the mysterious, polite, certified mass murderer Hazel figures strangely in the film. Her reputation precedes her via Gus' recollection of her horrific crime — something never visually represented. However, she never shows any sign of the madwoman who one day butchered her husband and young children with a carving knife that had been a wedding present. [CUL. Female

Serial Killers. Killing sprees where entire families are wiped out are almost without exception committed by men.]

Always shown with Catherine, as in this scene, her place in the film is enigmatic. She lurks politely, appearing like clockwork whenever things get hostile between Catherine and Nick. Her role, never active, seems to be simply to stand there — an allusion to a whole generation of women who might not have been what they were supposed to be. A horror hidden in an average, "nice" middle class woman's polite body. [CIN. The casting of the 1950s blonde bombshell B-movie star Dorothy Malone as Hazel is significant.²⁶]

CUL. Female Conspiracy. The plethora of doublings and parallels of the four female characters creates a maze of unsubstantiated alliances and identifications. Catherine preserves a special place in her heart for women who murder their loved ones. Hazel and Roxy are only depicted in relation to Catherine, who is the real object of inquiry: Is this guilt by association? Is one or the other responsible for the crimes? Although the women are only shown in pairs, the threesome of Catherine, Roxy, and Hazel evokes a kind of "evil sisters" triad: witches, harpies. Beth, the "dark horse," is always associated with the male space of the police department, never with other women. Yet all the evidence points to some perverse, obsessive connection between her and Catherine, the truth of which is never uncovered. Some sort of conspiracy is hinted at in the film, but never made visually or narratively explicit; the women remain separated in space, united only by the cloud of suspicion which falls on all of them.

With its preponderance of murderous, duplicitous women characters, *Basic Instinct* lacks the standard touchstone "good" wife, mother, or friend as counterpoint for

²⁶ J. Hoberman wryly comments on Dorothy Malone's intertextual significance: "Dorothy Malone periodically trapises out of the woodwork to reprise her '50s impersonation of nympho excitement—rubbing her back against the wall, sucking in her cheeks, batting her bedroom eyes."

the "spiderwoman"²⁷ contained in the other films of the cycle.²⁸ The terrain of the film is very bleak indeed, with a cast of perverse, dark, and twisted characters of both genders: The casting of the women is particularly striking, however, since women are so rarely perceived as violent criminals. CUL. Irony. The uncanny prevalence of what J. Hoberman calls "rich, beautiful, man-slashing crypto lesbians" takes *Basic Instinct* well into another realm of experience: over the top. Unbelievably, *all* the women in the film emerge as mass murderers of enslaved lovers, innocent hubbies, and small boys — and with castrating objects, no less. This plotline moves far beyond the purportedly "offensive" representation of women, lesbians, and bisexuals into a level of ironic overstatement.

Climax

The point where Gus is convinced of Beth Garner's guilt marks his downfall. Leaving Nick, off duty, in the car Gus goes into an office building to follow up on a lead. [SYM. Authority. By setting up Nick to look guilty in Neilson's murder, the murderess caused him to have his gun and his authority as a policeman stripped away.] Still in a daze after being dumped, Nick sits uselessly in the car. Tremulous, expectant violin chords fade up as Gus proceeds hurriedly into the elevator, pushing the button for the fourth floor. [HER. Knowing that Gus' appointment is on the fourth floor, we know how much time he and Nick have to avert disaster.] Although the building is deserted for the

²⁷ Janey Place calls this role, common to classic *film noir*, "the nurturing woman": "The opposite female archetype [to the spiderwoman] is also found in *film noir*: woman as redeemer. She offers the possibility of integration for the alienated, lost man into the stable world of secure values, roles and identities. She gives love, understanding (or at least forgiveness), asks very little in return (just that he come back to her) and is generally visually passive and static." (Place 50).

²⁸ *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* and *Body of Evidence* feature Annabella Sciorra and Anne Archer (who also played the faithful wife in *Fatal Attraction*), respectively, as the enduring "good" wives and mothers. In the roommate and buddy films, the "good" girls who prevail are Bridget Fonda (*Single White Female*) and Sara Gilbert (*Poison Ivy*). *Final Analysis* and *Basic Instinct* are the only films which definitively lack a redeeming female character.

evening, the elevator still stops inexplicably at every floor. At each stop, Gus peers out into the identical, neutral hallway; the shot from his point of view stresses his blindspots. [CIN. Negative Space. The unmotivated stops suggest that someone unseen is at work in the building, while the negative space outside his view is pregnant with the possibility of danger.]

As Gus reaches the second floor, cut to a close up on Nick in the car as he realizes the implications of the computer printout in the preceding scene. To the percussive and quickening score, he leaps out of the car and races toward the building. Gus' progress in the elevator is intercut in quick, choppy rhythm with Nick's frenzied race to intervene. Arriving on the fourth floor, Gus is met by a dark, hooded figure who lunges at him with an icepick. The mysterious character stabs viciously at his neck, again and again. The music spits deafening staccato chords. Blood flows freely as Gus slumps to the floor. Nick finds him there, seconds later, spluttering with blood, as there is a lull in the music. [CIN. This is very possibly a quote from the famous elevator murder scene in *Dressed to Kill* (1980). The raincoat and wig disguise evoke the of the DePalma villain, a self-hating schizophrenic transvestite psychiatrist.]

Hearing a sound in the hallway, the crazed Nick grabs Gus' gun. He races around the corner to find Beth, dressed in a simple dark robe, emerging from the stairwell. Reminiscent of the interrogation room, the corridor lighting is greyish, sliced through with strange bluish bars of light from unspecified sources. Nick yells over the quiet soundtrack for her to stop, to put her hands up. Inexplicably, she moves closer to him, speaking to him all the while in her soothing, reasonable psychiatrist voice. [HER. Is she trying to calm him down? If so, is it for his own good, or as a means to do him in as well?]

Beth's hand is in her pocket . Nick, frantic, holds his gun on her. As she approaches, he panics, thinking she has a gun, and shoots her down with a deafening

blast of the revolver. With this shot, the music cuts out all together, and all that is audible is Nick's breathing. He approaches her, and the camera frames her splayed on the floor, from his point of view looking down. Without emotion, she whispers, "I loved you." Then expires. He reaches into her pocket and finds not a gun, but her keys.

HER. A repeat of Nick's infamous past record of shooting innocent bystanders. This final disaster marks the full impact of the apparent scheme to discredit him with more of his old deeds of accidental shootings. Nick seems guilty not only of Beth's death, but of failing to prevent the death of his partner. This is the culmination, or almost the culmination of a well-orchestrated mindgame.

Yet when the police arrive, they discover the SFPD raincoat [CUL. Corruption. Walker states, "It was one of our own." An inside job.] and wig in the stairwell, as well as the .38 revolver in Beth's apartment. At this juncture, it seems that Beth was, after all, guilty. But there is a glimmer of a doubt remaining: How did Catherine's unpublished manuscript so accurately predict Gus' demise? What of the repeated warnings of Shooter's immanent death?

Denouement, or the Beginning of the End

After the police seem to establish Beth's guilt, cut to a night city scape of a hilly San Francisco Street. The musical score is a swelling horn theme, emphatic and solemn with accents of timpany. Nick drives too fast up the road, and parks his car at a precarious angle on the slanted street. [SYM. Danger.]

He enters his night-time apartment, dark and mysterious, lit by blocks of outside light filtered through venetian blinds. The music fades out, emphasizing the quiet of the moment. Anticipation. As he moves into the livingroom, we see Catherine standing by the window in shadow. [HER. What is she doing here? If she can so easily come and go

from Nick's apartment, she could also conceivably sneak into an office building to kill Gus, or into Beth's apartment to plant evidence.] She seems recalcitrant.

Catherine: (approaching him, still in shadow) "I can't allow myself to care about you. I can't allow myself to care."

(Close up, pacing, agitated, in tears. Catherine's first display of emotion with Nick.)

"I don't want to do this. I don't want to do this. I lose everybody. I don't want to lose you. I don't want to lose you."

Nick approaches her as the theme from the beginning sequence cuts in. Cut to an extreme close up of them in bed, kissing; we are pulled back into the intensity of the moment, the still-unresolved threat. Catherine's face still teary, conflicted.

[HER. This short speech, the first evidence of Catherine "losing control," becoming emotional, is deliberately ambiguous. It could either mean that she doesn't want to *kill* Nick, or that she doesn't want to fall in love with him — that she is somehow the victim of the monstrous, conniving Beth who has killed everyone she loves. The move to a sex scene signals a bookend solution to the crime: either she kills him and is guilty, or less likely, they will "fuck like minks...".]

The solemn theme music builds slowly, majestically as in the now-familiar position, she straddles him, and fucks him more slowly, more deliberately than before. Cut to a close up of Nick's neck as he throws his head back in orgasm. Catherine, now wearing a necklace, arches way back as before [HER. Will she kill him now? It couldn't end this way. Could it?] then falls heavily forward on top of Nick. Theme music: coda.

Later, they are framed in a high-angle shot side-by-side in bed but not touching. Peaceful. [CUL. The marriage bed. Their quiet co-existence here lacks the earlier passion. The distance between their bodies suggests either alienation, or an easing of tension between them.] Cut to a close-in profile shot of Nick, relaxed, smoking. Catherine asks, "What do we do now, Nick?" She turns on her side, away from Nick, as

the music returns. Nick, slightly ironic, or perhaps hopeful, responds, "Fuck like minks, raise rugrats, and live happily ever after."

Cut to a close up of Catherine's hand, wearing a ring now [CON Wedding ring finger] reaching under the bed. The music builds steadily to full song, in conclusion. She hesitates, then pulls her hand back. Cut to an icepick under the bed, glinting evilly. Hold for a long, thoughtful moment, then fade to black.

HER. Endings. The mystery is, unsatisfactorily, resolved. Catherine seems to be guilty although Nick's eventual fate still hangs in the balance. This open-ended finale allows for several possible readings: Perhaps Catherine has been reformed, genuinely moved by "the fuck of the century." The meaningful presence of the icepick suggests, however, that her transformation is only temporary.

CIN. Happy Endings. The generally bleak and cynical landscape of the film (along with the presence of the icepick) emphatically denies the possibility of a convincingly happy ending. The only phrase which the characters can muster to consider their future together is the thrice-repeated cliché: "Fuck like minks, raise rugrats, and live happily ever after." This phrase becomes merely a repeated mantra in a self-conscious context of decadence, moral decay, and despair. The bleak horizon of human relationships sketched out by the film offers little possibility of redemption.

SYM. Artifice of Narrative. The film's constant play with the question of authorship and manipulation of cultural texts adds an extra twist to the ending. While it seems that Catherine has changed her ending, the icepick's presence signals that she will decide the final outcome after the curtain falls. Further, this aspect foregrounds the problematic and constructed nature of the film's ending. Finally, the open-ended "to be continued" conclusion suggests the possibility of a sequel.²⁹

²⁹ See James Warren, "Baser Instinct: how low can Hollywood go in dreaming up sequel to psycho-thriller?" The Gazette 31 July 1992.

CHAPTER 4:
SPEAKING SEX AND SELLING QUEERS:
THE LIMITS AND POTENTIAL OF IRONY AND CAMP

Transgressive Sexualities: The Speaking and Selling of Sex

In this chapter, I shift from the primarily textual preoccupations of the immanent analysis into the discursive currents surrounding *Basic Instinct*. To begin, it is crucial to examine the significance of the highly-publicized Queer Nation protests which dogged and, ironically, promoted the film throughout — from the writing of the script, through production, to its cinematic release. While the significance of any cultural text is clearly inflected by the promotional machinery which frames and markets it, this is particularly true of the highly controversial *Basic Instinct*. Certainly the extensive publicity around the film's "homophobia" provides one important "line of flight" from the immanent textual analysis into the complex socio-discursive currents which move through the text,

Before addressing the claims of Queer Nation directly, however, it is important to frame the question of *Basic Instinct*'s representation of lesbianism and bisexuality within a broader context. What emerges strongly from the immanent analysis is the centrality of what I termed the code of "transgressive sexuality" within the text. Through analysis in the "cultural code" sections, I sought to sketch in these recurring threads (including homosexuality, bisexuality, autonomous female sexuality, and S/M practices) which connect with broader discourses around transgressive sexuality in contemporary North American society.

Throughout the cycle of films in question, the code of transgressive sexuality is central to the characterization of female serial killers. While lesbianism and bisexuality are most explicit in *Basic Instinct*, the problematic and eventually pathological, female-to-

female bond is also evident in *Poison Ivy* and *Single White Female*.¹ Other films of the cycle work with various aberrant female sexualities. *Body of Evidence*, almost an explicit remake of *Basic Instinct*, explores the tantalizing possibilities and dangers of S/M, as the Madonna character literally fucks her older male partners to death. *Fatal Attraction*, *The Crush*, and to a lesser extent *The Temp*, explore women's unrequited, obsessive passions which become murderous when frustrated.²

A trend not limited to the suspense thriller genre, this cultural preoccupation with sexuality circulates through much current North American popular culture. Even as some social critics may perceive this as a purely contemporary phenomenon, Foucault posits that the Western fascination with sexuality (the obsession with "speaking sex") is a long-standing historical phenomenon. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault traces the proliferation of discourses around sexuality from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century: "The nineteenth century and our own have been...the age of multiplication: a dispersion of sexualities, a strengthening of their disparate forms, a multiple implantation of "perversions." Our epoch has initiated sexual heterogeneities."³

For Foucault, this dispersion of sexual practices is facilitated by what he calls the *scientia sexualis*, or procedures for recording, analysing (and producing) the "truth of

¹ These two films feature a familiar version of lesbianism figured as an immature romantic bond between young adolescent girls. The attractions between Jennifer Jason Leigh and Bridget Fonda, and between Sara Gilbert and Drew Barrymore are represented through the common "mirror" imaging shots, as unhealthy, consumptive relationships which blur ego boundaries. The notion of the cannibalistic sameness within lesbian relationships, and of their "immature" status within sexual development, are Freudian tropes which are evoked to some extent within *Basic Instinct* as well. See, for example, the immanent analysis of the "club scene."

² While *The Temp* sets up a strong sexual attraction between hero Timothy Hutton and career woman/ temptress Lara Flynn Boyle, the woman's sexual and social "failure" is strongly represented by her need to fabricate a loving husband and daughter. This "empty nest syndrome" is exaggerated to the extent where she places on her desk a generic family portrait which is distributed as the sample photo with picture frames. Her ultimate aloneness and failure as a woman is made most dramatic when a suspicious Hutton sneaks up on her house only to spy her alone in bed, masturbating. While we gather that Hutton is every bit as desperate as Boyle, the film's double standard lets him get his rocks off feeling sorry for her.

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 37.

sex." The paradigmatic form of *scientia sexualis* in The History of Sexuality is the confession, which can be traced from the ritual of Catholicism through to the modern psychoanalytic "talking cure."

It is no longer a question simply of saying what was done — the sexual act — and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it. For the first time no doubt, a society has taken upon itself to solicit and hear the imparting of individual pleasures.⁴

In Hard Core, Linda Williams makes the connection between the *scientia sexualis* and the development of cinema and pornography. For Williams, the seeming literal recording capacities, first of photography, then of the moving image, allowed for an increasingly detailed and immediate recording of "ever more visible filmic bodies." "The specific cinematic nature of this emerging *scientia sexualis*...becomes, as Foucault notes, a "transfer point" of knowledge, power, and pleasure."⁵

In *Basic Instinct*, a central part of the hermeneutic quest is the investigation not only of forbidden sexual practices, but more specifically of the truth of the sexuality of the woman in question. In the spirit of the *scientia sexualis*, the film is obsessed with uncovering the "truth" of the offbeat (and therefore both suspect and highly-pleasurable) sexual practices of the female enigma, Catherine. This narrative obsession with "transgressive sexuality" is reinforced by its prominence in the "commercial intertext" around *Basic Instinct*. The publicity surrounding the film amplifies and capitalizes on the sexual components of the film, including homosexuality, bisexuality, and S/M. As suggested by the "multi-media moments" described in the immanent analysis, the segments of the film most frequently quoted and excerpted for movie trailers are the

⁴ Foucault 63.

⁵ Linda Williams, Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 36.

most sexually-provocative ones — particularly the interrogation scene with the now-famous pussy shot, and the club scene with Catherine and Roxy intertwined.

Similarly, in the print media, the images are most often drawn from the sex scenes, notably the close up of Michael Douglas licking the throat of Sharon Stone, her head thrown back in abandon. This image is reprinted in a startling number of feature magazine stories which claim to document "sex in the 1990s": From the cover story of Us ("Sex in Entertainment: How Far Can it Go?"; August 1992), to Studio's "*Chaud Business*" (June, 1992), to the Newsweek cover story on Madonna's book Sex (November, 1992), popular magazines have grappled with increasingly explicit and "naughty" sexual content in Hollywood cinema. Through this discourse, *Basic Instinct* is commonly framed and promoted as one of the "hottest films ever" — a claim which has been central to its considerable financial success. The appeal of "speaking sex" has been consciously mobilized by movie producers for profit in the North American marketplace. "Narrative image" is produced not only through publicity images and media commentary, but significantly also through star codes. As suggested in Chapter 2, this entire cycle of "fatal femme" films is closely connected by the recurring casting of certain stars. Specific discourses around "transgressive sexuality" are articulated most explicitly in the cases of Sharon Stone and Madonna.⁶

Body of Evidence, the 1993 clone of *Basic Instinct*, profits from star Madonna's carefully-marketed persona as a sexual rebel. Sex, the star's provocative coffee table book of erotic photos prompted a flurry of media commentary including Newsweek cover story, "The New Voyeurism: Madonna and the Selling of Sex."

A deft little way to make some money and grab some spotlight, "Sex" also promised our first barometric reading of a turbulence boiling in American

⁶ As mentioned above, Drew Barrymore of *Poison Ivy* is another star with a highly-sexualized image. Similarly, David Lynch's "Twin Peak girls" are now resurfacing in sexually-charged roles such as Lara Flynn Boyle's masturbating "temp," or Kelly Lynch's love-lorn lesbian in the bisexual love triangle, *Three of Hearts* (1993).

culture. Call it the new voyeurism: the middlebrow embrace, in the age of AIDS, of explicit erotic material for its own sake. From Mapplethorpe to MTV, from the Fox network to fashion advertising, looking at sex is creeping out of the private sphere and into the public, gentrified by artsy pretension and designated out of viral necessity. Canny marketers exploit it; alarmed conservatives, joined by many feminists, are trying to shut it down.⁷

The "selling of sex," recorded and promulgated through the channels of popular media, is the central tenet in the marketing strategy both of *Basic Instinct* and *Body of Evidence*. In both cases, the publicity promise of risqué sex is mobilized through the persona of the lead actress. *Body of Evidence* was an explicit vehicle for the outrageous Madonna. Released in January, 1993, the film was the third component in a trilogy of media events which included the book Sex, and the album Erotica (both launched in November, 1992 to much media clamour). While Madonna is a major cultural icon in her own right, Sharon Stone achieved this status through the promotional vehicle of *Basic Instinct*.⁸ Both women fall into a Hollywood tradition of "blonde bombshells," an iconography all bound up in codes of desirability, beauty, femininity, and sexuality.

The progress of Stone's dizzying rise to this type of stardom can be traced through coverage in popular magazines and television. In the spring of 1992, just after the release of *Basic Instinct*, she appeared on the covers of Details, the British Vogue, the French Max, and Us, to name a few. She also made subsequent guest appearances on *Saturday Night Live*, *The Barbara Walters Special*, and numerous other talk shows. Advance publicity for Stone's new film *Sliver* brought her back into the fray in April, 1993, gracing the covers of People, Premiere Magazine, and Vanity Fair. Arguably, Stone has eclipsed Madonna as North America's preferred magazine cover face. In some important

⁷ John Leland, Maggie Malone, and Marc Pryser, "The Selling of Sex," Newsweek November 1992: 95.

⁸ Stone's ascent to stardom began with *Total Recall* (1990), a film also directed by Paul Verhoeven. Her role in this film as the duplicitous, sexy wife of Schwarzenegger was a thematic precursor to the Catherine Tramell character.

ways, however, these two function similarly as female star icons and cultural symbols of "bad girl" sexuality.

The extensive magazine coverage of Sharon Stone is greatly preoccupied with her "sex goddess"/ temptress status. Tagged variously as "hot stuff," the "hottest woman in Hollywood," "glamour goddess," "*magicienne du sexe et femme de tête*," Stone fits into a category of seemingly interchangeable blonde "sex goddesses." The recent variation in this theme is an increased association with transgressive sexuality combined with "bad girl" bitchiness or assertiveness. Much of the media coverage plays off Stone's temptress role in *Basic Instinct*: Interviews characteristically done by men foreground extensive accounts of flirtation: For example, the by-line, "Interview by Kent Black, a Los Angeles-based journalist who did not get a date with Sharon Stone" (*Details*, April 1992); or "Stone showed Kevin Sessums her intellect, her breasts, and the uniquely macho femininity which has earned her the respect of such powerful women as Sherry Lansing and Camille Paglia" (*Vanity Fair*, April 1993). Stone's "sex goddess" status is relayed with a slight difference in the April 5, 1993 *People* cover story: "Hollywood's Sexy Rebels: Sharon Stone...Shannen Doherty, Kim Basinger and a new breed of actress are playing by their own rules and making no apologies for taking charge of their lives."⁹

These media discourses around a new generation of in-your-face, assertive, sexually-liberated women are a fascinating phenomenon in themselves, a discussion far beyond the scope of this thesis. However, I sketch this out in order to suggest the complex and many-faceted articulations of the code of transgressive sexuality which can pulled from the analysis of *Basic Instinct*. In the inevitable and partially consciously-produced slippage between the film's textual system and the constructed star persona of Sharon Stone, there is a strong hint that the confessional discourse of "transgressive

⁹ Stone is an interesting case, as she has been framed as Hollywood's first "brainy" sex goddess. Media coverage commonly notes that A-student teenager Stone attended university at 16. In interviews, Stone presents a self-consciously "feminist" persona.

sexualities" is powerfully bound up with the notion of autonomous female sexuality. These themes are closely connected to the status of North American feminism. In the concluding chapter, I will discuss this theme (and female autonomy more generally) as a discourse central to *Basic Instinct* and the cycle more generally.

Relating the Queer Nation protests to the broader context of "the selling of sex," it is important to understand that the culturally-charged status of homosexuality makes it an ideal vehicle for the promotion of *Basic Instinct*.¹⁰ In a sense, the film does not directly "represent" homosexuality, but rather mobilizes its problematic status to its own ends. Although there is almost no explicit lesbian sexuality within the film, the unerring selection of the scenes with Catherine and Roxy for promotional materials suggests the powerful appeal of the "forbidden" in the marketplace. Ironically, the Queer Nation protests (including a series of headline appearances on *Entertainment Tonight* the week of the film's opening) seem to have been recuperated into this aspect of the film's publicity. Without a doubt, the widely-publicized consternation of the gay and lesbian communities both augmented the film's international "event status" — and also inflected the complex discourses of gender, sexuality, and power which circulated around the text.

As Foucault's theory suggests, the continual proliferation of sexual discourses does not merely multiply the possibilities and positions of sexual pleasure. The "implantation of perversions" is intricately linked to modalities of power-knowledge: "It is

¹⁰ No longer simply "taboo," homosexuality is a topical and problematic figure in contemporary North American society which has been produced and defined within the productive process of Foucault's "implantation of perversions." Although one of the demands of gay activists has long been "visibility" (especially in popular representation), gays and lesbians currently occupy an unprecedented space in the North American psyche. For example, in the wake of the June 1993 lesbian and gay "March on Washington," *Newsweek* (21 June 1993: 54-60) ran a cover story entitled "Lesbians: Coming Out Strong. What are the Limits of Tolerance?" This increased general "visibility" is due in part to high-profile lesbian and gay lobbying efforts, AIDS, as well as to the cultural obsession with "speaking sex" defined above. As this discussion of *Basic Instinct* suggests, this increased visibility brings with it more and more complex representations of homosexuality. These increasing levels of complexity necessitate similarly nuanced strategies for critical and activist interventions.

through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities that the relations of power to sex and pleasure branched out and multiplied, measured the body, and penetrated modes of conduct."¹¹ The connection in *Basic Instinct* between lesbianism, bisexuality, and criminal pathology suggests a discursive regularity of considerable political import. The concerns of Queer Nation around the stereotypical framing of lesbians and bisexuals as manhating serial killers in the film deserve careful attention. However, a more detailed analysis of the complaints of the lobbyists in relation to the overlapping socio-discursive framework, as well as the textual complexities of *Basic Instinct*, reveal some evocative points of contradiction.

The goal of this discussion is not to attack Queer Nation's protests of *Basic Instinct*. Instead, I undertake in this project an intervention at a more abstract level of theoretical discourse, and of popular critique. For within "queer theory" and feminist media criticism more generally, I find the common tendency to demonize or celebrate particular cultural texts as an unfortunate one which precludes the possibility of pulling out rich and complex areas of confusion and contradiction. Moving beyond the common political compulsion to separate the good objects from the bad, I am interested here in how the text articulates with broader socio-discursive currents around gender, sexuality, and power. The Queer Nation position on *Basic Instinct* (and other recent films) is indeed a strange one for the Gay Liberation Movement, which has traditionally taken a strong anti-censorship position.¹² The refusal of Queer Nationalists and affiliated groups to address the textual complexities of these films (and *Basic Instinct* in particular) flies in

¹¹ Foucault 48.

¹² In Canada, activists have battled over state censorship of gay and lesbian erotic materials over the past 15 years. These anti-censorship politics have proved a constant focal point of organizing, including during the rise of Queer Nation groups in Toronto and Montréal. This odd timing meant that while on the one hand, lesbian and gay artists were protesting book seizures in lesbian and gay book stores, their comrades (and some of the same individuals) were picketing theatres with the slogan "*Basic Instinct* = Basic Boycott." Stranger than fiction.

the face of a long-standing "queer" tradition of textual appropriation, ironic readings, and camp.

In the preceding immanent analysis, I sought to position the text within a number of overlapping discursive formations. Through the cultural codes, I related the text to various cinematic and cultural conventions related to the representation of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals. In the next section, I will take up this discussion in more detail. I will look at various aspects of the place of "queers"¹³ within and around *Basic Instinct* — both the oppressive, punishing, narrative conventions and the rich possibility for an ironic "camp" lesbian and/ or feminist reappropriation of the film. By examining repressive cinematic regularities as well as the exception and nuance offered by reading formations, I seek to move beyond the polarity of good text/ bad text into a more complex discussion of textual politics.

• a Queer Nation Protests

In the wake of escalating gaybashing both in the U.S. and Canada, as well as anti-gay legislation in parts of the U.S. tied into the 1992 presidential election campaigns, North American lesbian and gay activists have become deeply concerned with the representational power of popular culture. The conceptual link between day-to-day oppression experienced by disenfranchised groups and negative or stereotypical media representations is not a new notion, but one which has been explored by the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., and more recently by American and Canadian feminists

¹³ The term "queer" is employed here not merely as an abbreviation of "lesbian and gay." Teresa de Lauretis outlines the importance of "queerness" in the following manner: "The term 'queer'...is intended to mark a certain critical distance from the by now established and often convenient, formula [of 'lesbian and gay']. For the phrase 'lesbian and gay' or 'gay and lesbian' has become the standard way of referring to what only a few years ago used to be simply 'gay' or, just a few years earlier still, 'homosexual.'" (Teresa de Lauretis, introduction, *differences* 3.2 1991: iv.) The "critical distance" referred to by de Lauretis marks what I would call the "ironic" (for lack of a more precise term) "queer" political sensibility of a younger generation of lesbian and gay liberationists. Part of the strategy of nomenclature here is to reclaim and toy with formerly derogatory terms.

such as Mediawatch and anti-pornography lobbyists. While the sweeping question of the relation between mediated representations and statistical acts and attitudes is far beyond the scope of this thesis, the example of *Basic Instinct* is an interesting one which may shed some light on the limitations of literal "positive images" readings of cultural texts.

Just prior to the release of *Basic Instinct* in April, 1992, Queer Nation groups all over North America coordinated a protest against the "homophobic" representations within the film. In Montreal, "Queer Nation Rose" circulated a flyer with the following text:

HOLLYWOOD HATES WOMEN. PROPAGANDA KILLS QUEERS.

The movie "Basic Instinct" is the latest attack on women and queers. Four out of four lead characters are man-hating murderers and three are lesbian or bisexual. This reinforces Hollywood's classic defamation of lesbians as killers who deserve to be killed. Lesbians are portrayed as deadly, but date rape is eroticized.

...

The movie "Basic Instinct" perpetuates a climate in which women, specifically lesbians and bisexual women, are seen as sick, man-hating, and threatening and therefore are permissible targets of hate and violence. Films like "Basic Instinct" fuel the increasing epidemic of violence against lesbians, gays, and women.

This was the rhetoric of the Montreal chapter of a North America-wide gay and lesbian mobilization around a series of 1991 Hollywood films: *The Silence of the Lambs*, *JFK*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and *Basic Instinct*. All of these films were targeted as featuring "problematic" queer characters, plots and subplots.¹⁴ Without addressing the specifics of each case, *Basic Instinct* is undoubtedly the film most centrally engaged with what the protesters perceived as damaging, "negative" stereotypical images of lesbians and bisexual women. As a result, Queer Nation and other activist groups tried

¹⁴ A major flaw in the Queer Nation argument is the way in which all of these films were lumped together as "homophobic," while the articulations of homosexuality were quite distinct in each case. While homosexuality and pathology were arguably linked in the subplot of *JFK*, and in the flamboyant (heterosexual) transsexual of *Silence of the Lambs*, the unspoken tender romance in *Fried Green Tomatoes* won the film a GLAAD film award. This conflation of critiques on the part of lobbyists lacks the subtlety to identify rare and important feminist heroines like Jodie Foster's character in *Silence of the Lambs*, or Idgie's character in *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

to intervene in highly-publicized negotiations during the writing and production phases of the film. Upon the film's release, unappeased activists planned direct actions including pickets and pamphleting at cinemas, as well as a major demonstration at the 1991 Academy Award ceremony. The goal of these media-oriented protests was to advocate for more "positive images" of lesbians and gay men in the media.¹⁵

The position of the Queer Nation protesters relies on the arguments articulated notably by Vito Russo's important Celluloid Closet, an historical exploration of the representation of lesbians and gay men in mainstream (primarily Hollywood) cinema. Russo's work identifies the consistent stereotyping of lesbians and gay men within the medium. In addition to a number of prevalent stereotypes, he writes of the historical demonization of gays and lesbians.

Gays as predatory, twilight creatures were a matter of style and personal interpretation in the horror films of the 1930s. The equation of horror with the sins of the flesh is easily seen in monster movies of the period...The essence of homosexuality as a predatory weakness permeates the depiction of gay characters in horror films.¹⁶

Historically, transgressive peripheral sexualities have been linked with murderous pathology in films such as Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980), or the recent *Silence of the Lambs* — all of which feature transvestite or transsexual serial killers. The presence of hateful lesbians in Hollywood film, while less frequent than that of gay men, is also documented by Russo. In a whole cycle of B-movies of the 1960s and 1970s, for example, lesbian vampires (often nymphomaniacs) figured prominently. Similarly, in other genres, Mercedes McCambridge's appearances in

¹⁵ My paper ("A Discerning Look at *Basic Instinct*: Reconsidering positive image politics," Concordia University, 1992) looks at some of the in-movement repercussions of these protests. On a more pragmatic level, if nothing else, they managed to introduce the concept of "homophobia" into public discourse — much in the same way that "images of women"/ anti-pornography activism by feminists, and NAACP protests advanced the popular critique of "sexism" or "racism" in North American culture.

¹⁶ Vito Russo, The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies (revised edition) (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) 48-49.

Johnny Guitar (1954) and *A Touch of Evil* (1958) made her a veritable one-woman vengeful lesbian stereotype. Finally, there is the famous portrayal of the predatory Russian double agent by Lotte Lenya in *From Russia with Love* (1963).¹⁷ In this context, the outrageous prevalence of murderous lesbian/bisexual characters in *Basic Instinct* was identified by Queer Nation protesters as an indefensible continuation of the casting of lesbians as "as killers who deserve to be killed."

In addition to the well-documented prevalence of lesbians and gay men as undesirable or even psychopathic characters in mainstream cinema, Russo notes how these figures become expendable within conventional narrative formulas — they are consistently eliminated either through murder or suicide. (For example, McCambridge is shot by Joan Crawford at the end of *Johnny Guitar*, and Lenya is "pricked" with her own poison needle at the hands of James Bond.) During the Queer Nation protests, activists intimated that the narrative convention of the convenient demise of gay or lesbian characters is echoed in *Basic Instinct* — particularly the predictable deaths of Roxy and Beth. This convention is attacked in the slogan "Propaganda kills queers," a phrase which suggests that there is a link between the murders of queers on celluloid and rising incidences of gaybashing.

Looking at the evidence provided by the immanent analysis of *Basic Instinct*, it is clear that the film works, or perhaps more accurately, "plays" with the well-established figure of the pathological lesbian manhating murderess. The Roxy character exemplifies the sullen, hostile, jealous "butch" lover who is inevitably eclipsed in her lover's attentions by the virile male. In the final confrontation with Nick, she is, conveniently, eliminated in order to provide the necessary heterosexual resolution to the love triangle.¹⁸ After Roxy's death, we discover that as a minor she slashed the throats of her

¹⁷ Russo calls Lenya "the dyke with a spike." 332.

¹⁸ This part of the plot-line is virtually identical to that of *The Fox*, a story by D.H. Lawrence which was adapted into a forgettable Canadian film by Mark Rydell (1963) featuring Sandy Dennis.

two little brothers (the family's male heirs). As Nick and Gus peruse the disturbing pictures of the corpses, they learn that Roxy did the dastardly deed with Daddy's razor, no less — quite a symbolic castration of patriarchal power. Roxy takes the rap in the film, without a doubt, as manhater, par excellence.

To assess the "stereotypical" qualities of the other three murderesses is a more complex task. The Hazel Carby character played by Dorothy Malone exhibits no particular sexuality within the diegesis. Her act is perhaps most disturbing because she committed her heinous crime (the slaughter of her husband and kiddies) just "out of the blue one day," as Gus remarks. Malone's 1950's B-movie sex goddess points to a link between transgressive female sexuality and pathology. Yet this connection is tenuous. Hazel's sexuality remains undefined, except for the possible "guilt by association" with Catherine Tramell.

As far as Beth Garner's and even Catherine Tramell's criminal and sexual status, the open-ended nature of the ending leaves a question mark over the identity and motivations of the killer. Beth, for example, seems in a perpetual state of denial over her past attractions to women. She tries desperately to recuperate her intimacy with Nick, to the point where her dying words to him are, "I loved you." Yet with the discovery of a scrapbook of "Catherine" memorabilia, the shadow of her strange fascination with Catherine hovers over Beth's death. The final appearance of the icepick in, or at least near, Catherine's hand, would seem to indicate, however, that Beth was perhaps framed by Catherine. Still, the film's multiple murders and of the intimated connection between Catherine and Beth are never completely explained. This unsubstantiated connection, as well as the mysterious "icepicking" of Beth's former husband to death (and the fact that she neither dresses, lies, nor "fucks" as well as Catherine) all mean she probably deserved to die anyway.

The Catherine Tramell character provides the most complex and contradictory link between stereotypical images of bisexuals and pathology. Ostensibly the film's villain, Catherine is a far more charismatic and photogenic protagonist than the Nick Curran character. A great deal of my immanent analysis (reflecting, to some extent, the preoccupation of the hermeneutic quests within the diegesis) has focused on the characterization and formal framing of Catherine.

For one, the Catherine character is not a lesbian, but a bisexual woman.¹⁹ Catherine claims that her long-term emotional attachment is to Roxy, while she chooses to "fuck men." This claim is supported by her uncharacteristic emotional response when Roxy dies. However, this allegiance is undercut by the framing of their relationship within the cinematic conventions of heterosexual porn: Roxy and Catherine are never represented on their own terms, but always in relation to a male voyeur (Nick). The club scene, in particular, situates Catherine and Roxy as the voluptuous, straight-looking long-haired lesbians of conventional pornography. They provide the classic appetizer to the "main dish" of the heterosexual love scene which we are constantly reminded, may (or may not) have been the "fuck of the century." While Verhoeven toys considerably with the conventions of the gaze (with Catherine's slamming the cubicle door in Nick's face, or Roxy's voyeurism during the sex scene) the love triangle is ultimately recuperated to the detriment of Roxy, the film's only "true" lesbian.

The above assessment of the relatively circumscribed and stereotypical roles of lesbians and bisexual women describes one prevalent reading of the film. Certainly the

¹⁹ Ki Namaste suggests that the fundamental "ism" operative within *Basic Instinct* is not homophobia or misogyny, but "biphobia." I acknowledge his more selective use of terms, but reject the kind of thinking which necessitates reducing a complex and contradictory text to some fundamental prejudice. Ultimately, the label "biphobia" may describe important elements operative within the text, but overlooks others (such as the framing of women) which are, as I will argue, central to the film's signifying system. See Ki Namaste, "Le déplacement et la crise du réel: La socio-sémiotique et la biphobie de *Basic Instinct*," Université du Québec à Montréal, 1992.

Queer Nation allegations that "*Basic Instinct* perpetuates a climate in which women, specifically lesbians and bisexual women, are seen as sick, man-hating, and threatening and therefore are permissible targets of hate and violence," is based on this interpretation. While the film plays some with the possibilities of alternate readings, different layered gazes, a range of sexual possibilities, it ultimately seeks to return to the "straight and narrow" of cinematic convention. This is particularly true of the deaths of Roxy and Beth, shady women characters who are punished for their sins. Finally, the outcome of the love triangle points to the narrative and cultural requirements of heterosexual closure: They will "fuck like minks, raise rugrats, and live happily ever after."

Yet the power of immanent critique is its ability to identify these "homophobic" tropes or discursive regularities as a limiting framework, while still pulling out the latitude for uncertainty, ironic play, and contradiction within the text. As I will argue in the next section, the film's ambiguous ending, its consistently "over the top" quality, its play with intertextual reference, its postmodern black humour and self-conscious sensibility, are all factors which undermine the closure suggested by the Queer Nation slogan "Catherine did it."

The Play of Postmodern Irony

After watching *Basic Instinct* several times, I was consistently struck by a sensibility which resonates with a "structure of feeling" in contemporary North American society. Within the immanent analysis, I designated this sensibility as the cultural code of "irony." An elusive, context- and culturally-specific quality, irony cannot be easily described. Yet this concept provides a key to the generic and cultural context of this cycle of films. And for a discussion of "queer representation," the concept of irony articulates closely with elements of an historical "camp" sensibility.

Linda Hutcheon suggests that "irony plays a dominant role in the definition of the postmodern through its mix of the playful and the provocative."²⁰ For her, the power of irony's doubleness springs from its simultaneous distance from and complicity with the social context. Hutcheon claims that "there is a power in irony's doubleness, a power to contest the singleness associated with repressive authority."²¹ In this vein, the ironic reworkings of genre in *Basic Instinct* (and to a lesser extent the other films of the cycle) tend to produce discursive openings and doublings in the text. Although these articulations of genre work from oppressive conventions (such as the containment of strong women and lesbians) their concurrent distance and exaggeration undercuts absolute closure and containment.

Following from the discussion of "postmodern genericity" in Chapter 2, I found within the immanent analysis considerable evidence of what Collins calls an "ironic hybridization of pure classical genres."²² A Dutch director who comes at Hollywood genre as an outsider, Verhoeven's earlier work (notably *RoboCop* and *Total Recall*) displays an eclectic and often "ironic" approach to genre. In *Basic Instinct*, he consistently takes certain tropes of classic *film noir* (such as the *femme fatale*) and pushes them to the absolute extreme of the possibilities of realism — and beyond. Verhoeven's simultaneous exaggeration and "play" with genre opens up a space within the text for doublings and triplings of meaning, as well as an ongoing gentle deconstruction of the formulas of genre.

Take, for example, the opening few scenes which I examined in some detail in the immanent analysis. The murder sequence, while absolutely riveting as an erotic and

²⁰ Linda Hutcheon, "The Power of Postmodern Irony," Genre • Trope • Gender: Critical Essays by Northrop Frye, Linda Hutcheon, and Shirley Neuman, ed. Barry Rutland (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1992) 35.

²¹ Hutcheon 38.

²² Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties," Film Theory Goes to the Movies, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993) 243.

violent fantasy, hammers home the classic *film noir* thematic link between female transgressive sexuality and violent death. This potentially "ironic" moment is both serious and not-serious, pulled between the immediacy of its shock-effect, and its absolute exaggeration. This thread continues, as in a marvel of overstatement, the film subsequently parades an astounding proliferation of crypto-lesbian serial killers across the screen. Read in relation to the broader cycle of contemporary films in question, *Basic Instinct's* explosion of homopathic women on the screen is the most extreme example of a trend which is itself bizarre and overdone. The overpopulation of female murderers in this cycle (as well as in TV docu-dramas and direct-to-video releases) is certainly overexaggerated in relation to statistical incidents of women who kill (and especially female serial killers). I will return to the significance of this reversal at length in the final chapter.

In addition to the hyperbolic theme of the film, the film's replay of conventional classic *film noir* "hard-boiled detective" dialogue; its cartoonish overblown construction of certain character "types" and its tongue-in-cheek reappropriation of psychoanalytic discourse are other concrete aspects of *Basic Instinct's* ironic sensibility. For example, in the second scene, "hard-boiled detective" Nick Curran makes his entrance via an explicit *Streets of San Francisco* intertextual reference. This character is an exaggerated projection of 1990s paranoid manhood, the "good cop" of yesteryear gone beserk. J. Hoberman captures the overblown essence of the Michael Douglas character.

A hard-boiled wiseguy who leads with his putz, Douglas here synthesizes all previous roles from *Fatal Attraction* and *The War of the Roses* to *Black Rain* and *The Streets of San Francisco*. Various known as "Hoss," "Shooter," or "Nickie," he's a superego tied into a pretzel, a cop with an addictive personality who consistently does the wrong thing — most spectacularly, we gather, when two tourists wandered into his line of fire.²³

²³ J. Hoberman, "Blood Libel," rev. of *Basic Instinct*, dir. Paul Verhoeven, *The Village Voice*, 31 March 1992: 55.

Dialogue offers another instance of the ironic sensibility in *Basic Instinct*. As discussed in some length in the immanent analysis, the stiff, self-conscious banter when Nick and Gus first encounter Catherine, provides an excellent example of *Basic Instinct's* deadpan, comic strip dialogue: Nick: "How long were you dating him?" / Catherine: "I wasn't dating him, I was fucking him." / Gus: "What are you, a pro?" / Catherine: "No, I'm an amateur." This type of "ham-fisted" dialogue takes the fast-paced, witty patter of Raymond Chandler, and replays it stilted, cliché, and explicitly, provocatively sexual at all costs.²⁴ The bizarre, unmotivated pauses and the predictable punctuation of mood music at "significant" points of discussion only add to the self-conscious and contrived quality of the script. Also, the deadpan style of acting in this scene is consistent throughout the film. Totally devoid of emotion for the most part, the actors' flat delivery belies the passionate combination of sex and death seemingly so central to the narrative.

Psychoanalysis is another classic *film noir* theme which appears early in the film and is pushed to the point of absurdity. According to Krutnik, the twentieth century North American popularization of Freudian analysis was absorbed into Hollywood thrillers by the 1940s.

References to psychiatrists, psychoanalysts and such Freudian conceptions as the unconscious and the subconscious became increasingly common in Hollywood films of the 1930s...

Even more significant...were the ways in which norms of characterization, strategies of sexual representation, and aesthetic and narrational devices became inflected by a broad-based psychoanalytic frame of reference.²⁵

In *Basic Instinct*, psychoanalysis figures centrally at the level of character as both Catherine and Beth (as well as "expert" Dr. Lamont) have training in psychology.

²⁴ An argument could be advanced that this quality is simply "bad writing." However, I am not concerned here with value judgements, but with the "feel" of the text. The cheap quality of the setup, from dialogue through to overall plot, functions notably to augment the film's provocative, sexually-explicit, and unapologetically slick and commercial surface.

²⁵ Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: film noir, genre, masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 45-46.

Further, Freudian tropes pepper the film, with its liberal flourishes of castrating objects (including the ubiquitous ice pick, as well as other weapons of preference for the "castrating" female killers). On the level of Freudian sexual and developmental symbolism, the text is all bound up in configurations of sexual guilt, nymphomania, heterosexual male and lesbian performance anxiety, pathological sexual obsessions, and mistaken identities. As Krutnik suggests, this explicit or implicit incorporation of psychoanalysis often sets up an "association between Freudian psychoanalysis and hidden or illicit sexuality."²⁶ In fact, the film's obsessive return to S/M and "abnormal" sexual acts associated with death frames it metaphorically in terms of a Freudian "confessional mode."

While, as Krutnik suggests, these figures are common to a more general "pop-Freudian" movement, their sheer volume, intensity, and exaggeration pushes the reference to the level of absurdity. For example, the overblown psychobabble of Dr. Lamont (underlined by his deadly serious direct address in extreme close up) undermines the seeming import of his speech: "You're dealing with a devious diabolical mind... I'm talking about a deep-seated obsessional hatred and utter lack of respect for human life." Gus' statement that he "sometimes can't tell shit from shinola, Doc," confronts and gently mocks Lamont's excessively technical jargon.

If psychoanalytic discourse figures in the text as a common *film noir* trope, it is often infused with a doubled ironic quality. In *Basic Instinct*, psychoanalysis no longer functions as the touchstone of "truth" as in *Spellbound* (1945), *The Dark Mirror* (1946), or *The Still of the Night* (1982). Instead, the ironic inflection of psychoanalytic discourse plays into the film's self-conscious manipulation of questions of gender, authority, and power. A tendency echoed in *Final Analysis*, the problem of patriarchal authority,

²⁶ Krutnik 50.

psychoanalytic solutions, and gendered power is a point which I will return to at some length in the next chapter.

In this section I have outlined certain aspects of *Basic Instinct* which articulate with a more general cultural trend toward postmodern irony. This sensibility, so central to the text, flies in the face of any literal or closed reading such as the one put forward by Queer Nation. The "double-voicing" of irony produces a play between the serious and the not-serious — between the (sometimes oppressive) formulas of genre, and its exaggeration and deconstruction.

Specifying Irony: Textual Tensions and Reading Formations

While the above elements of *Basic Instinct* can be clearly attributed to a postmodern ironic sensibility, the film is not merely a series of quotations, an entertaining and consistently subversive parade of ironic tropes. Linking the textual complexities of *Basic Instinct* to the broader cycle of films in question, a tension emerges between ironic self-reflexivity and the "sincerity" (or dead earnestness) of recurring tropes of the genre. The tongue-in-cheek elements of *Basic Instinct* strain against the commonly misogynist conventions of the genre — particularly the consistent and troubling articulation of pathology and violence with transgressive female sexuality.

Following from the section on postmodern genericity in Chapter 2, Straw adds another level of complexity to the discussion of ironic exaggeration in *Basic Instinct* (and in the genre in general). He describes a tension between the openness or "dispersion" commonly attributed to postmodern textuality, and what he calls "the gravitational pull of narrative and generic structures." Against the common association between postmodern textuality and dispersion and depthlessness, Straw introduces a new metaphor of verticality. He claims that "a variety of postmodern textual forms function according to an economy based in the alignment of different distinct levels." Such an approach permits a

theoretical distinction between the implied "closure" of genre, and the culturally-charged embellishments of style, irony, and intertextuality which tend to open the text up to different readings. In a discussion of Fassbinder, Straw writes the following.

Inasmuch as they are, in a sense, written over highly codified and conventional generic and narrative structures, they employ the rhythms and fluctuations of narrative intensity inherent to those structures. This particular economy often follows different trajectories than does the unfolding of the particular political projects of these films. These different levels will be in varying states of alignment in the course of the text's unfolding, and the particular nodal points at which that alignment is most intense produce new rhythms within the text. The fastening of the film, intermittently, around certain gestural or compositional figures grounded in a reference to Hollywood [forms] redistributes pleasure and intensity throughout the text and produces differentiation within audiences based on the extent to which these are shared.²⁷

Straw's approach allows for a more precise account of "queer representation" in *Basic Instinct*. Like all of the other films of the cycle, the structure, pacing, and themes, of *Basic Instinct* are structured on the suspense thriller model. According to the common structure of *film noir*, the hermeneutic investigations of crime and woman are conflated into a single quest. The generic requirements of closure such as the deaths of lesbians and "fallen women" are fulfilled by the demise of Roxy and Beth. Yet these incidences of containment play against the moments of interruption, reversal, and ironic excess which I have described above. To some extent, this tension can be traced throughout the cycle of films, although in *Basic Instinct* the emphasis of the plot is most explicitly toward the ironic and playful pole than toward containment. I will return to the issue of containment and the "fatal femme" in the final chapter.

In the case of *Basic Instinct*, the indistinct outcome, the film's constant philandering and sexual innuendo undercut the closure implied by the *film noir* structure. The text is constantly interrupted by moments of theatricality, heightened play with the

²⁷ Will Straw, "The discipline of forms: mannerism in recent cinema," *Cultural Studies* 1.3 (1987): 372.

gaze, and no-holds-barred voyeuristic and erotic excess. These elements are further focused into highly-charged nodal sequences which I have identified as "pregnant moments" or "multi-media moments" which gain significance through their status as distinct media events in themselves. As Straw suggests, the particular points of alignment between the tension of the thriller, and these excessive, ironic, and theatrical moments, "redistribute pleasure and intensity throughout the text."

As a conclusion to this discussion of the politics of the Queer Nation protests, I am interested in Straw's assertion that such a redistribution "produces differentiation within audiences based on the extent to which these [gestural or compositional figures] are shared." This notion of differentiated audiences, subcultures, or reading formations provides an excellent point of insertion for a gay and lesbian "camp" sensibility. For while the ironic and "over the top" qualities described above are part of a potentially broad "postmodern genericity," there are points of overlap with a specifically gay and lesbian reading formation.

In Bond and Beyond, Bennett and Woollacott introduce the concept of "reading formations" as a means of studying the contingent and dynamic quality of the social production of meaning. For these authors, meaning is not fixed within a closed textual system, but rather, "text and reader are conceived as being co-produced within a reading formation."

This is not to suggest that texts have no determinate properties — such as a definite order of narrative progression — which may be analysed objectively. But it is to argue that such properties cannot, in themselves, validate certain received meanings above others; they do not provide a point of "truth" in relation to which readings may be normatively and hierarchically ranked, or discounted.²⁸

²⁸ Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero (New York: Methuen, 1987) 64-65.

Part of the goal of the immanent analysis was to identify different strands of contradiction and confusion within the film. A partial mapping of the openings within the text, this analysis offers a complex account of the multiple of readings produced by the film — what Bennett and Woollacott term “different “texts-to-be-read.””²⁹ In relation to the Queer Nation protests, the notion of a “queer” reading formation (or “camp”) is especially pertinent as a challenge to the literal reading offered by the activists. Further, the rigidity of meaning implied by the “positive images” model undercuts the possible influence of the highly-publicized Queer Nation protests on other “reading formations.” The gay and lesbian intervention around this film was a significant intertextual element which inflected the socio-discursive significance of the film.

As indicated in the immanent analysis, *Basic Instinct*, ironically, offers several themes and qualities which are potentially highly-recuperable by some contemporary lesbian, feminist, and gay audiences — notably the film's high degree of theatricality and artifice, and the lusciously overplayed characterizations of postmodern gender roles. In the next section, I introduce “camp” as a specific gay historical reading formation which links up to certain aspects of irony in *Basic Instinct*. Clearly, there is some overlap between general “postmodern irony” and contemporary “camp”; without a doubt, these two sensibilities have interesting points of cross-fertilization. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I am interested in particular aspects of the film's irony which might appeal to a “queer” reading formation.

Camp In *Basic Instinct* : Theatricality and Irony

In “Camp and the gay sensibility,” Babuscio describes camp as a creative response on the part of gay people in interpreting a world often hostile to them: “Camp is never a thing or a person *per se*, but, rather, a relationship between activities,

²⁹ Bennett and Woollacott 260.

individuals, situations *and* gayness."³⁰ For Babuscio, camp is comprised of irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humour. He describes the theatrical element of camp in this way.

To appreciate camp in things or persons is to perceive the notion of life-as-theatre, being versus role-playing, reality and appearance. If "role" is defined as the appropriate behaviour associated with a given position in society, then gays do not conform to socially expected ways of behaving as men and women. Camp, by focusing on the outward appearances of role, implies that roles, and, in particular, sex roles, are superficial—a matter of style. Indeed, life itself is role and theatre, appearance and impersonation.³¹

Even as, according to Straw's framework, the film plot follows *noir* themes, from the somersaulting camera and mirrored ceiling of the murder scene onward the film consistently digresses into excesses of appearance for appearance's sake. The film's highly-stylized neutral decor (a complex reworking of Hitchcock, DePalma, and more recent "yuppie thriller" interiors) through the belaboured parallel subplot of Catherine's novel, the film exudes artifice, role-play, slick surfaces. With none of the crimes really solved, none of the characters truly revealed, the film eschews all truth, morality, or hermeneutic depth.

The hermeneutic quest of the murder/ sexual investigation philanders and digresses repeatedly into spectacle and theatricality. From the opening scene, the central theme of explicit, larger-than-life, goopy sexuality is served up with style and gusto. Many of the scenes which I selected for the immanent analysis are strong theatrical moments which stand almost on their own as segments of trailers, film stills, and movie out-takes. The famous interrogation scene, the club scene, as well as the much touted "hot" sex scenes, provide moments of pure spectacle which interrupt, embellish, or contradict the underlying detective story. As Straw's model suggests, while

³⁰ Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the gay sensibility," ed. Richard Dyer *Gays & Film* (New York: Zoetrope, 1984) 40-41.

³¹ Babuscio 44.

the generic narrative provides the bare bones of the text, the intertextual moments of spectacle and theatricality add particular emphases and contradictions.

The stage-like setup of the interrogation scene, for example, reinforces the highly-theatrical convention of woman-as-spectacle. Yet, in a delightful reversal of the assumed power relations of female objectification, Stone's outrageous performance flips the power dynamics. Hoberman captures the spirit of the moment:

Questioned by the police, the Stone character not only brazenly smokes in a no-smoking zone and confounds six seasoned cops (their faces pouring sweat into the camera) with her frank sex talk but, eschewing underwear and donning a miniskirt, favors us all with a tantalizing flash of puss deluxe. *Schw-i-i-i-ning!* Whether or not the scene sells the movie, it's enough to send Douglas pirouetting off the wagon into a date-rape *pas de deux*.³²

Of the film's many theatrical moments, this scene is perhaps the most dramatic, the most often replayed through various media channels. During a *Saturday Night Live* appearance, Stone did her lines for this scene word-for-word to the ecstatic response of the audience. The striking impact of the scene's provocative play with gaze, and the absolute naughtiness of Stone's performance allow for considerable audience pleasure in this scene. The closure implied by a literal reading of the thriller narrative is challenged by the protracted, glamourized, highly-staged and self-conscious scenes where Stone challenges male voyeuristic, sexual, and intellectual authority. Not merely gay or lesbian viewing pleasure, this moment is perhaps particularly recuperable for an ironic queer reading formation interested in outrageous theatricality. Also, the Catherine Tramell character offers considerable potential as a camp icon³³ along the lines of great celluloid bitches like Joan Crawford or Bette Davis. According to Hoberman, "with her

³² Hoberman 55

³³ Within autonomous "queer" film production, Greg Araki quotes *Basic Instinct* and *Thelma and Louise* in his outrageous 1992 film, *The Living End*. An "irresponsible" road movie about two HIV+ men, the film is littered, ironically, with murderous duos of lesbians equipped with castrating objects. The contingent quality of irony (and the prevalence of "positive image politics") is reflected in the film's uneven reception within lesbian and gay circles.

repertoire of Lilith wiles and vampire smiles, Stone gives the snakiest performance since Amanda Donahoe in *Lair of the White Worm*.³⁴

In addition to theatricality, for Babuscio, camp is characterized by irony.

Irony is the subject matter of camp, and refers here to any highly incongruous contrast between an individual or thing and its context or association. The most common of incongruous contrasts is that of masculine/feminine... At the core of this perception of incongruity is the idea of gayness as a moral deviation.³⁵

Gender roles exude perhaps the most "overdone" elements in *Basic Instinct*. As described above, the Nick character provides a slightly ridiculous male protagonist. Negative and stereotypical representations of lesbians and bisexuals aside, the Nick character as weak and unsympathetic hero is a damning depiction of the state of heterosexual manhood. Sporting his green v-neck in the gay club, Nick is the very image of "the straight man." While the plot perhaps suggests that Nick's virility eventually "does it" for Catherine, his stiff, awkward stance in the club and his obvious distaste for the counter-culture types around him label him potentially (in the eyes of the sexual counter-culture) as "uncool," a bigot. From an ironic gay perspective, Douglas looks pathetic in contrast to the gyrating, funky, beautiful people surrounding him. In his highly-ironic review of the film cited above, Hoberman discusses a campy twist in the film's construction of Douglas.

As this coy camera placement [on Douglas' bare ass] suggests, it is Douglas who is the movie's real love object... So is *Basic Instinct* being homophobic or naturalistic when it gives his lumbering partner (George Dzundza) an unrequited crush? Deducing that Douglas has been to bed with Stone, Dzundza is no less jealous than Sarelle: "Goddam sonofabitch, you fucked her. How could you fuck her!" That this public tantrum was evidently shot at a gay-and-lesbian country-western bar called Rawhide II suggests that Verhoeven, at least, understood the implications of this scene.

³⁴ Hoberman 55.

³⁵ Babuscio 41.

Hoberman's play with subtext and innuendo is characteristic of camp readings of mainstream film. As this passage and the preceding one on Douglas (the "hard-boiled wiseguy who leads with his putz") suggest, *Basic Instinct* potentially offers a field day for camp readings, both gay and non-gay.

The detectives' ineffectual "male-bonding" operates in sharp contrast with the powerful women in the film, projecting a high state of male paranoia. This reading of the film is popular among some lesbian and feminist critics. Village Voice lesbian writers C. Carr and Amy Taubin challenged the preferred Queer Nation reading of *Basic Instinct* in a double discussion under the headline, "Ice Pick Envy."

This is a movie about male anxiety and paranoia. Women who are sexually powerful cause their anxiety, as do women emotionally attached to other women. Catherine is both. True — she and the other three might all be killers. But look who they've killed. Family, for one thing. Brothers. Men who might become husbands. It's part of the whole male anxiety scenario. In fact, it's almost a parody of a guy's worst nightmare. And I thought it was a scream.³⁶

Carr's reading of the film suggests an alternative "queer" feminist reading of the film. The very public site of these articles place them in dialogue with the more hegemonic gay readings printed in The Advocate ("Homophobia in Hollywood II: The Queer Empire Strikes Back," April 7, 1992) or New York Queer ("Homos vs. Hollywood," March 29, 1992). Less resilient in the broader mainstream press than the Queer Nation rhetoric, these alternate ironic or camp readings nonetheless speak to some extent to "queer" reading formations. In their densely-argued and highly ironic popular interventions, the Voice journalists touch on many of the points which I develop in the thesis. Specifically, these writers push the analysis away from the critique of homophobia, toward questions of women, power, and representation. As a response to

³⁶ C. Carr, "Reclaiming Our *Basic* Rights," The Village Voice, 28 April 1992: 35-36.

what she feels is a limited and sexist gay male response to the film, Amy Taubin sums up the *Basic Instinct* controversy in this way:

By focusing the discussion of the film on homophobia rather than misogyny (yes, they do go together but they're not the same), man hating was transformed into something we should be careful not to let George Bush brand us with, rather than something all women experience. And a terrific opportunity to examine the representation of women and power was lost. (Bumper sticker: VOTE THE BETTER BUSH—TRAMELL FOR PRESIDENT.)³⁷

Implications

The extensive and multi-faceted reading of *Basic Instinct* developed in this chapter suggests a significant blindspot in the "positive images" politics of Queer Nation. The protests around this film exemplify a prevalent cultural politics (employed variably by anti-pornography feminists, anti-racist activists, and right-wing moral majority groups, among others) which involves making critical or aesthetic judgements of popular texts based on closed political readings. In assuming that meaning resides exclusively within the text, such a strategy refuses the complex discursive threads which weave through all cultural artifacts, whether homemade "self-representation," or highly-suspect commercial products such as *Basic Instinct*. Through the isolation of "offensive" figures in character and narrative, this style of analysis is unable to speak to subtleties of cultural and political context. By situating an imaginary "fixed" text at the beginning and the end of the process of signification, this approach precludes the range of readings offered by gaps and contradictions within the text. In particular, I suggested a "camp" reading of the film in order to highlight the contingent and productive quality of meaning in cultural texts. And considering the rich history of camp reappropriation, the many surprising and

³⁷ Amy Taubin, "The Boys Who Cried Misogyny," *The Village Voice*, 28 April 1992: 36.

oblique possibilities for pleasure offered by popular culture should come as no surprise to lesbians and gay men.

In contrast to the Queer Nation approach, this project creates a cultural criticism which can move beyond the conundrum of fixed meanings, whether positive or negative. In this chapter, through the sections on Foucault's "speaking sex" and postmodern genericity, I positioned the text within a broader field of constant cultural and generic transformation. Rather than vilify a single text as intrinsically "bad," (or, conversely, claim for it an unqualified "subversive" status), I undertook in the immanent critique and in this chapter's discussion of irony to open up some of the film's productive layerings and multiple articulations. Through this case study of *Basic Instinct*, I demonstrate the textual contingency and the potential for openness and reappropriation offered by even this most-maligned of films. Like the Village Voice pieces cited above, I opt in this thesis not to reinforce the idea of popular culture's monolithically oppressive power, but rather to work productively with its gaps and inconsistencies.

The Queer Nation protests have strongly inflected the "narrative image" of *Basic Instinct*. However, the issues of sexual orientation and sexuality more generally form only one of many discursive threads which moves through this film and the rest of the cycle. In this chapter, I have chosen to address these questions, but as a starting point instead of a conclusion — as one thread in a complex web of discourses. By placing the film within a broader generic and commercial cycle, I point to the central elements of the film which are missed out in Queer Nation's focus on the stereotypical representation of lesbians and bisexuals. As Taubin suggests, these elements are gender and power. Throughout this chapter, I have hinted at the centrality of a number of themes to the figuring of gender and power within the cycle. These include female autonomy, the figure of the fatal femme, narrative containment, spectacle and the gaze, and psychoanalysis.

In the next and concluding chapter, I will address these "lines of flight" in relation to the entire cycle of fatal femme films.

CHAPTER 5:
THE “FATAL FEMME”:
FEMINIST REWORKINGS OF VIOLENCE AND POWER

As a counterpoint to the thesis' project of articulating “complexity” in cultural criticism, I am also concerned here with the relation of this cycle of films to the larger social formation. From the above discussion of queer representation and irony, I shift in this final chapter toward issues of gender and power which run through the entire cycle of films. The preceding descriptions of postmodern production and genericity lay the textual groundwork to grapple with the complexities of the problem of the “violent femme.” In the introduction, I set up this exceptional fatal femme cycle against the hegemonic feminist, and more general framing of women as *victims of male violence*.

When I began looking at this cycle of films, my questions were formulated around the terms of gender, violence, and power. In the face of women's predominantly passive role in popular representation, the hyperbolic figure of the female serial killer practically leaps off the screen at the viewer and the critic. Initially, then, I was intrigued by the bizarre, exaggerated, and commercially mushrooming phenomenon of armed, violent women in film. As I sketched out the regularities of narrative and character in Chapter 2, and delved deeper into the specific (and in some ways exceptional) case of *Basic Instinct* in Chapters 3 and 4, I established some of the limits of genre and the importance of ironic play in this cycle. Still, even after these deliberations, I am left with the troubling and irreducible figure of the “fatal femme.”

From the outset, I have made the theoretical and political choice to emphasize the subversive potential of these evocative figures in this thesis. Yet at this juncture, I still find myself torn between this dramatic exception and the sobering and stubborn dailiness, the “regularity” of violence against women. In this chapter, I will move beyond

this binary opposition by examining several "lines of flight" which spring from the immanent analysis, and from the cycle more generally. By developing these trajectories, I will trace out different facets of the multiple and productive powers attributed to the "violent femme." First, however, I will examine some specific writings about female serial killers. These writings help clarify the political and theoretical feminist contexts which I address implicitly and explicitly in the present "reframings" of gender, violence, and power.

Female Serial Killers: Silences and Sensationalism

Significantly, most feminist writings grant little air-time to the troubling fatal femme figure except as a male construct. For example, Marilyn French's discussion of serial killers reflects a common feminist position on gendered violence.

The overwhelming majority of serial murderers are men (female serial murderers often appear in films but there are almost none in actuality). Most mass murders are committed by men as well, and many focus on women. Marc Lépine shot fourteen female engineering students at the University of Montreal in December 1989. He then committed suicide, leaving a note: "Even if the Mad Killer epithet will be attributed to me by the media, I consider myself a rational, erudite man."¹

French makes the explicit point that Lépine's act was not an exception, but the rule for male behaviour. Implicit in the argument is the notion that women are victims of male violence, and not murderers themselves. French's paranthetical statement that female serial killers are a sensationalist cinematic by-product and not a real-life phenomenon (and therefore not worthy of comment), echoes the sentiments of many other feminists. Faludi, for example, claims that the female murderer is a product of Hollywood anti-feminist backlash. The logic of most contemporary feminism frames the

¹ Marilyn French, The War Against Women (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992) 196.

problem of female violence as a media-promulgated paranoid male fantasy which belies the actual statistical occurrences of male violence against women.

While there is some resonance between this bleak "backlash" scenario and elements of the films of the cycle (such as the common "punishing" of autonomous women), this position fails to describe all the nuances of the phenomenon. In fact, predominant feminist distaste for the issue of violent women or women who kill, either in "real life" or in representation, means that there is little literature about this problem. Much feminist rhetoric follows an underlying assumption — notably that women are somehow intrinsically passive or victimized, and that they could only be violent in self-defence. So powerful is this belief (in female moral transcendence, or at least passivity) within feminism and within popular discourses more generally, that the figure of the female serial killer (both "documented," as in the case of Aileen Wuornos², or "imagined" in Hollywood film) is extremely disturbing to feminists and non-feminists alike.

Cultural critics in the liberal mainstream, like feminists, have often been leary of the lethal combination of women and violence. As the animated discussion around *Thelma and Louise* (1991) suggests, reversing the gender of the person behind the gun (or the sharp implement, for that matter) does not make for a simple, symmetrical substitution. In a more direct response to the films of this cycle (in many ways less defensible for feminists than *Thelma and Louise*) John Paczkowski articulates a common "cultured" distaste for the articulation of sex and violence in what he calls "Trash Cinema":

Understand: Sex is violence. This is what Hollywood would have us believe. In an era in which Sharon Stone has ascended to the highest pinnacle of cinematic iconography by wielding an ice pick, and Madonna has stopped the hearts of the pathetic few with the deadly machinations of her crotch, it would seem that eroticism and violence in American cinema have come into irrevocable confluence. Hollywood is recalibrating

² The highly-publicized Florida case of Aileen Wuornos, a lesbian prostitute who murdered several men, is a recent explosive case of a "real" female serial killer.

the perpetual frame through which we view the world to include the merger of sex and violence...When our choices are so limited, strong measures are called for. Perhaps an industry-wide purging, something to staunch the moral illiteracy that has become so rampant in Hollywood productions in recent years.³

Now, understand this, Paczkowski is no moral majority writer; this article ran in a trendy magazine of "Left Coast Culture." What interests me, then, about this all-too common mainstream outrage about sex and violence in the movies is how the writer opts to pick on the fatal femme phenomenon. Surely this heightened articulation of sex and violence is not limited to these films, but is rather symptomatic of a more general escalation? Yet, like the many squeamish critics of *Thelma and Louise*, this writer earmarks the disturbing articulation of *women*, sex, and violence for his wrath. As Sharon Willis writes of the feminist and anti-feminist furor around *Thelma and Louise*, "These readings activate and seek to manage the fantasies of women's rage and autonomy coming together in figures of dangerous feminine power that seem to preoccupy the culture."⁴

As Willis suggests, this broader cultural preoccupation with feminine power is at the root of the many extreme responses to films which feature violent women. It would seem that the powerful figure of the fatal femme is troubling to feminists and mainstream critics alike. This widespread cultural resonance of such hyperbolic figures lends the cycle much of its commercial appeal of cultural taboo. And in theorizing this exception to the norm, it is this cultural charge which presents the loaded possibility of rupture.

³ John Paczkowski, "Trash Cinema: Hollywood's New Prurience," Soma: Left Coast Culture 22 (Spring 1993): 39.

⁴ Sharon Willis, "Hardware and Hardbodies, What Do Women Want?: A Reading of *Thelma and Louise*," Film Theory Goes to the Movies, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993) 121.

Feminist Criminology and the "Violent Femme"

Criminology is one area of feminist endeavour which has sought to address head-on the problem of women who commit violent crimes. Several recent studies of the phenomenon of women and crime combine empirical data, interviews, and a discussion of representation. For feminist criminologists, the distinctive feature of traditional scholarship is the invisibility of female offenders; consistently, the rates of female crime were considered too low to merit much attention. In Women and Crime, Frances Heidensohn notes that historically women are responsible for only a small percentage of crimes, most commonly committing petty crimes such as theft. Yet in contrast to statistical data, she notes that "in recent years there has been something of a moral panic created about the allegations that women's share of crime was rising faster than that of men and rising particularly fast in unfeminine and untypical offences such as robbery and violence."⁵

Heidensohn refutes this "moral panic," insisting that while overall crime rates have risen, the small female portion of violent crime (some 10-15%) has remained static since 1951 in England and Wales.⁶ Like French and Faludi, she attributes the "moral panic" around female criminality to sensationalist excesses in the media. While a small percentage of women are implicated in terrorism, murder, armed robbery, and other violent crime, she asserts that a study of the relationship between women and crime would be best served by attention to conformity.

[A]n examination of female criminality and unofficial deviance suggests that we need to move away from studying infractions and look at conformity instead, because the most striking thing about female behaviour on the basis of all the evidence considered here is how notably conformist to social mores women are.⁷

⁵ Frances Heidensohn, Women and Crime (New York: New York University Press, 1985) 6.

⁶ Heidensohn 6.

⁷ Heidensohn 11.

Interestingly, most of Heidensohn's chapter on "female deviance" (where she specifically addresses transgressive sexuality and violent crime) refers to the field of representation rather than case studies. She discusses long-standing societal myths around the virgin/whore dichotomy, the *femme fatale* of *film noir*, etc. This approach tacitly refuses the "exceptional" cases of "actual" female violent criminals and murderers as aberrant products of representation.

In her study of female serial killers, Candice Skrapec takes a different stance. Choosing to highlight the "underrepresented" phenomenon of female serial killers, she maintains that a *small but significant number* of women do commit violent crimes.

Violent criminality has been marked out as an essentially male province by the criminal justice system, criminological researchers, and the media. Homicide, in particular, is viewed as a predominantly male crime, female offenders tending to be relegated to an "exceptional case" status that rests upon some exceptional or untoward, compelling circumstance: the battered wife who kills her abusive husband; the postpartum psychotic mother who kills her newborn infant.⁸

In response to her work on female serial killers, Skrapec notes that most people are incredulous that some women do, in fact, commit multiple murders. Critiquing this generalized reluctance to perceive women as violent, Skrapec takes an "equal opportunities" approach to the discussion of female serial killers. She notes that historically, women have been responsible for a steady 10-15% of homicides in the U.S.; similarly, women comprise roughly the same proportion of serial killers.⁹

⁸ Candice Skrapec, "The Female Serial Killer: An Evolving Criminality," Moving Targets: Women, Murder, and Representation, ed. Helen Birch (London: Virago Press, 1993) 242-43. The scenario of the battered woman striking back and killing her attacker has been a popular one in 1980s film, including some of the "final girl" films including *Mortal Thoughts* (1991) and *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991); also, Farah Fawcett starred in the made-for-tv *The Burning Bed* (1985) based on a true story of a battered woman who kills her husband. Similarly, in the popular press, Time Magazine ran a cover story in January, 1993 about battered women who kill their husbands. (See Nancy Gibbs, "Til Death Do Us Part," Time Magazine, 18 January 1993: 34-41.)

⁹ Skrapec 243. In her eagerness to reclaim this ground for women, Skrapec suggests that common sexist assumptions may further skew the figures toward male perpetrators — and that, considering unsolved crimes, women's responsibility for murder and serial murder may be even greater than currently accepted.

Although Heidensohn and Skrapec report comparable figures, their conclusions differ sharply. Heidensohn asserts that 10-15% of violent crime is a negligible proportion, while Skrapec zeroes in on the exception as a challenge to the notion that women are inherently gentle and peaceful. This schism of opinion coincides with a similar polarity in feminist debates around gendered violence in Hollywood film. Feminist cultural critics are split between a staunch insistence on representing the "realism" of the general rule (that men brutalize women), or the possibility that the female serial killer on celluloid represents a significant challenge to this rule (as in this thesis). As Helen Birch points out, predominant legal and scientific attitudes toward female violence articulate strongly with broader cultural values.

The idea that women are capable of extreme violence is an anathema to most of us. Meanwhile, in courtrooms and newspapers throughout the Western world, women who kill are divided into two camps: bad — wicked or inhuman; or mad — not like "ordinary" women. The extreme defines the norm.¹⁰

Throughout the preceding discussion of *Basic Instinct*, I have tended to emphasize the role of the "extreme." This is a strategic choice, articulated partially in response to the hegemonic feminist construct of ubiquitous "violence against women," both in everyday life and in representation. As Birch suggests, the extreme does define the norm. The powerful "charge" of the female serial killer figure operates in relation to a broader social field where women are characterized predominantly as passive victims. Further, the in some ways "extreme" and exceptional case of *Basic Instinct* helps identify the greater normalizing tendency within the other films of the cycle.

In her discussion of the "deviant" female, Heidensohn recounts that, between the role of virgin and whore there is a representational gap. Women who commit crimes are stigmatized simultaneously as highly-sexual and pathological — set against the norm of

¹⁰ Helen Birch, introduction, *Moving Targets* 5.

passive female conformity. Most important of all, there is no space between the extremes of the victim and the psychopath, for a more nuanced account of female criminal behaviour. In an entrenched double standard, the articulation of women and criminal behaviour (and especially violent behaviour) carries a damaging stigma for women individually and as a group. According to Heidensohn, "amongst [all models of female deviance], there is no conception of the "normal" exuberant delinquency characteristic of males."¹¹

Traditionally, there has been little discursive space within North American society to play with female transgressive behaviour, particularly in the combustible form of violence. Through the immanent analysis, I sketched out some of the ways in which the "crypto-lesbian psycho-killers" of *Basic Instinct* offered a certain openness to interpretation by their very incongruity. By pointing out the over-the-top quality of the text, I sought to problematize the predominant feminist or queer "political" reading. This immanent and playful approach does not seek to fix this reading as the correct one, but rather to suggest points of divergence and fluidity which spring from the text — which speaks with different inflections to varying reading formations.

Working through textual complexity in relation to socio-discursive currents around sexuality ("speaking sex") and postmodern cultural production, in Chapter 4 I moved beyond the either/ or of closed political cultural criticism. In the following "lines of flight" which circulate around broader political issues of gender and power, I leap into the void, into Heidensohn's "gap of representation" around the fatal femme. As I address pertinent questions of violence, psychoanalysis, narrative containment, and the gaze in the cycle of films, I will fill in some of the conceptual space between the worldview which universalizes "violence against women," and its mirrored vigilante feminist heroine.

¹¹ Heidensohn 88-95.

The Violence Factor

Despite ongoing stereotypes of women as passive and nurturing, the "fatal femmes" of this study are not a strictly isolated phenomenon. In fact, Hollywood cinema has recently produced a surprising and escalating number of women bearing not children, but arms. Manohla Dargis refers to 1980s Hollywood cinema as "the decade that women went ballistic."

That they were handling artillery on screen at the very same moment setbacks from Baby M to *Webster* were heralding a hard-hitting assault on women's rights points to the curious ways in which movies speak to and for us. Male anxiety and privilege, female rage and collusion — all fueled that essential '80s artifact, *Fatal Attraction*. Delirious with contradiction, Adrian Lyne's notorious feature split women along an impossible divide between sex and maternity. That film ends with Anne Archer's wan New Traditionalist blowing away Glenn Close's steamy careerist, a testament to just how stormy the new morning in America really was.¹²

According to Dargis, the last decade has signalled a broader range of violent women, from the law enforcers of *Blue Steel* and *Silence of the Lambs*, to the female terrorist of *The Crying Game* (1992), to the justifiable homicide of *Sleeping with the Enemy*, to the "fatal femmes" of this cycle. Yet as she points out, the key for feminist analysis is to decide: "When is a gun a gun — and not just another excuse for a dick?"

When first addressing the phenomenon of female serial killers in these films, I was convinced that the key point of reversal and play was around the term of violence. If, as Dargis points out, the crux of the analysis is to decide when a gun is just a gun, the meaning seems to reside in the weapon or the violent act. But when I began to rethink the implications of violence within these films, I was struck by how a non-specified category of violence tends to limit analysis. Within this cycle, the depiction of violence (implied; graphic; off-screen; mediated through photographs and other technologies) varies considerably from film to film. While the victims and motivations of the crimes

¹² Manohla Dargis: "Arms and the Ma'am," *The Village Voice*, 1 December 1992: 19.

present some commonality, it is the often *melodramatic* quality, the "family" scenario which stands out rather than the *modus operandus* in these hybrid 1990s thrillers. Even if a film like *Single White Female* contains certain elements of the "slasher" scenario, by and large the cycle operates through the production of suspense, anticipation, dread — and often through innuendo. Within the immanent analysis, I described how the buildup and release of tension describes the structure of *Basic Instinct* much more accurately than a listing of incidents of violence — even though this buildup at times erupts into violent scenarios. This discrepancy underlines the point in the previous chapter that by keeping a sharp eye to textual intricacies, a savvy theorist can cut through the baggage of pre-ordained rhetorical categories (such as "positive images," "violence against women," or "violence in the media"). With sharp attention to generic and narrative shifts, we can begin to redefine the terms of discussing the political implications of cultural texts in different spheres of endeavour — from the academy through to the popular.

Christine Holmlund describes the recent phenomenon of the female killer in Hollywood cinema as "a decade of deadly dolls." In her article, she refers to a more thematically and generically diverse group of films than the cycle considered here, including *Black Widow*, *Aliens* (1986), *Fatal Attraction*, *Blue Steel*, *Mortal Thoughts* (1990), and *Thelma and Louise* (1991). While Holmlund's roster clearly opts for more interesting "A-movies" rather than generic or commercial cycles, her framing of the subject-matter of the films merits comment. She suggests that although the unifying feature of these "deadly doll" films is women who kill, their content of on-screen violence is actually minimal.

Each film includes at least one murder, but often only as the starting premise or end point of narrative lines otherwise structured around romance, sexuality, conquest and violence — for all six movies are really

more obsessed with the changing shape and status of heterosexual femininity than with homicide.¹³

Similarly, in this cycle of films, while the “female serial killer” is the unifying feature, I realize in retrospect that the core preoccupation is with gender roles — more specifically, white, affluent femininity and masculinity.¹⁴ And, more specifically, the films are figured around gendered *power relations*. The unhelpful victim/ criminal dichotomy set up by the violence against women scenario (and its feminist vigilante reversal) points to the limitations of an analysis figured solely around violence.¹⁵ The symbolic violence played out in these films functions productively. Not merely following binary gendered power positions, these shifting scenarios suggest new articulations of the traditionally “male” domain of physical violence and weaponry. In addition to the range of action in these films, Dargis’ many different “ballistic women” offer new scenarios of physical confrontation.¹⁶

As suggested above, the feminist construct of violence against women is inadequate to examine this exceptional phenomenon of female serial killers. While violence is an implicit element of the thriller scenario, it cannot be isolated as a determining signifier. Neither are all representations of violence “bad,” nor are all

¹³ Christine Holmlund, “A decade of deadly dolls: Hollywood and the Woman Killer,” *Moving Targets* 135.

¹⁴ Although this discussion has been framed significantly around “femininity,” the missing “ghost” term of analysis is, of course, masculinity. For if femininity is projected in violent flux, then so is masculinity. As feminist theorists turn more and more to examining the construct of “masculinity,” this is another key “line of flight” which deserves closer attention.

¹⁵ Because of space constraints, I cannot undertake a more in-depth study of “violence” here. However, the problems presented by the blanket discursive category of violence point to the need for more specific theoretical and practical tools to unpack the construct of violence, whether in the media, in everyday experience, or in the media.

¹⁶ Dargis maintains that some of these films, notably *Silence of the Lambs* and *Thelma and Louise*, offer new and liberating accounts of a strategically-wielded guns. Not merely women on a rampage, these gun-toting heroines employ deadly force in the symbolic service of feminism. Similarly, Holmlund plugs the subversion in every feminist’s favourite 1991 film, *Thelma and Louise* — as well as *Mortal Thoughts*. The analysis of the intuitively less-appealing texts of *Basic Instinct* and the rest of the cycle is, however, important as a commentary on generic regularities and fluctuations, as well as the productivity and complexity even of more troublesome texts.

instances of violent women "good." Rather, as Homlund points out, physical violence is often secondary to discourses around contemporary femininity. And in a context of rapid changes in gender roles, discourses of violence and physicality are articulated strongly with other aspects of economic, sexual, and social power.

In the next section, I will develop other "lines of flight" in order to look at some key instances of gendered power relations in the cycle. As implied by the multivalent breadth of the immanent analysis, these trajectories cannot produce an exhaustive description of questions of power within *Basic Instinct* or the broader cycle. Rather, by selecting several key instances, I seek to develop a number of overlapping discussions which speak to the broader problematic of power within these films, and within feminist theory more generally. Moving beyond the repressive power of the violence against women construct, I will next trace some ~~arteries~~ of the productive circulation of power through the fatal femme cycle.

Psychoanalysis: Knowledge-Power Formations In Gender Flux

As suggested in the preceding chapter, classic *film noir* is imbued with many psychoanalytic figures. *Final Analysis* and *Basic Instinct* foreground the analyst-analysand relationship in ways that simultaneously highlight gender-power dynamics, and destabilize the authority of psychoanalysis as guarantor of truth. The play of psychoanalysis in these two films suggests both as an ironic redeployment of one of the meta-knowledges of modernism, and ultimately as an oblique challenge to psychoanalytic feminist film theory.

In Madness and Civilization, Michel Foucault chronicles the inscription of psychoanalysis into the very fabric of twentieth century Western society. His intervention historicizes psychoanalysis as an institution and as "discourse" — rather than as some ahistorical, transcendental "truth" of the human psyche. In tracing the institutional

crystallization of psychoanalytic discourses, Foucault brings to light the profoundly political link between power and the production of truth. For Foucault, psychoanalysis constitutes one of the great "normalizing" discourses of this century — a *productive* discourse closely connected to the contested fields of gender, power, and sexuality.¹⁷

Deleuze and Guattari take Foucault's argument one step further in Anti-Oedipus, where they posit that the Oedipal family structure of psychoanalysis has become "one of the primary modes of restricting desire within capitalist societies."¹⁸ According to Deleuze and Guattari, psychoanalytic structures saturate "desiring-production" in the continuous private and social field — and into the realm of capitalist representation and commodification. If psychoanalysis has become what Deleuze and Guattari call "a kind of universal Catholic symbol," it is unsurprising that popular culture is steeped in psychoanalytic figures.¹⁹

More specifically in the area of the cinema, within the classic *noir* formula, Frank Krutnik suggests that psychoanalysis has often circulated at the level of narrative, where psychoanalytic "experts" aid in solving the crime; this convention is particularly prevalent with the investigation of a "deviant" female by a male authority figure (notably, in Hitchcock's *Marnie*). With this double hermeneutic quest, the "scientific" insights of psychoanalysis are harnessed in the search for deeper "truths" of the female psyche, reviving that age-old question, "What *do* women want?" Krutnik writes, "In popular discourses, the methodology of psychoanalysis bears similarities to processes of detection, in that the analyst seeks to bring to the surface and make visible that which is hidden or latent, unearthing concealed motivations and seeking to construct an ordered

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization: Insanity in the Age of Reason (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

¹⁸ Ronald Bogue, Deleuze and Guattari (London: Routledge, 1989) 88.

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 51-56.

picture of the truth from a disordered and at times seemingly chaotic *bricolage* of clues."²⁰

In both *Basic Instinct* and *Final Analysis*, the male hero investigates the blonde enigmatic women who hold the key to the crime. These quests are framed quite literally in psychoanalytic language (*Basic Instinct*) and personified through the therapeutic process (*Final Analysis*). Yet these inquiries do not deliver the "ordered picture of truth" expected of the genre. Rather, the doubled criminal and sexual investigations are constantly confounded by evidence that doesn't add up, and by gendered reversals and power struggles.

Final Analysis offers a twisting series of leads and switchbacks for the male psychiatrist/ investigator. In this film, Richard Gere tries to get to the bottom of patient Uma Thurman's disturbing dream which seems to suggest early childhood abuse. The patient repeats the dream several times throughout the film, but is unable to remember its outcome. Gere seeks out Thurman's sexy older sister (Kim Basinger) for more family background, but loses his professional distance when he falls in love with her. When Basinger's jealous mob husband dies mysteriously by her hand, she elicits the Doctor's "expert" testimony to get her off the hook. Eventually Gere realizes that he has been manipulated by both sisters.

Thurman's "treatment" concludes with her telling him that the mysterious dream was a mere fabrication pulled from an obscure text of Freud. In a moment of high irony, the much-diminished doctor is required to seek out the case in the library. Pointedly, the allegations of childhood abuse which would establish Freudian "causality" for the women's crimes was a mere ruse. Thurman and Basinger's conspiracy to use the

²⁰ Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: film noir, genre, masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991) 50.

doctor's knowledge against him presents a dramatic blockage of traditional institutional analytic access to the depths of the female psyche.

Gere's ineffectual psychiatrist suggests a troubled contemporary "take" on the classic figure of the Freudian doctor. In Madness and Civilization, Foucault describes how "the doctor...remains the key to psychoanalysis" in the following manner.

[Freud] exploited the structure that enveloped the medical personage; he amplified its thaumaturgical virtues, preparing for its omnipotence a quasi-divine status. He focussed upon this single presence — concealed behind the patient and above him, in an absence that is also a total presence — all the powers that had been distributed in the collective existence of the asylum; he transformed this into an absolute Observation, a pure and circumspect Silence, a Judge who punishes and rewards...²¹

While Foucault did not organize his discussion of psychoanalysis specifically around gender, his observations about power apply almost directly to the gender politics of psychoanalytic praxis and theory. Given the cultural potency of the Freudian doctor figure, a reversal of the male analyst/ female analysand relationship has potentially subversive implications. In Hollywood film, *Spellbound* represents an early instance of a female therapist — where Bergman, the female doctor, must relinquish her expertise for love. Contemporary films like *Prince of Tides* (1991), *Whispers in the Dark*, and especially *Basic Instinct* further exploit the possibilities offered by reversing the gender of the culturally-loaded figure of the analyst.

In *Basic Instinct*, detective Nick Curran (Michael Douglas) embodies the authority of law in the double investigation of a murder and of the provocative "deviant" fatal femme, Catherine Tramell (Sharone Stone). Yet Douglas' authority is diminished when pitted against two trained female psychologists in Catherine and police psychiatrist Beth (Jean Tripplehorn). The unappealing detective-hero engages in complex sexual and intellectual mindgames with both these women in the course of his investigation. He is

²¹ Foucault 277-278.

even obliged by police internal affairs to solve his considerable personal problems through Beth's counselling. Ultimately, though he has rejected her, the tables are turned when he realizes that Beth has leaked his personal file.

Catherine, the strangely omniscient culprit, leaves complex trails of clues which lead every which way, only to unravel by the end of the film. Although the ice pick glittering under the bed in the final scene cements Catherine's guilt, the film's complex web of psychoanalytic inquiry is unable to produce a motive. Nick, the primary investigator, somehow "lacks" the ability to uncover the truth about Catherine, while she, through shady means, has procured his psychiatric profile. In a neat reversal of the usual gendered direction of analysis, Catherine, a student of psychology and best-selling novelist, uncovers Nick's questionable past — and writes him in as the victim of her next murder mystery, *Love Hurts*. If knowledge is power, then Catherine has it all.

In most of the other films of the cycle, the investigation produces one single aberrant female who can be conveniently wiped out to restore equilibrium within the diegesis. Yet in *Basic Instinct*, there is no such firmament, and all women seem to be suspect. The following discussion of endings and containment develops some of these ideas further. However, it is important to note here that the indeterminacy of endings in *Basic Instinct* and *Final Analysis* (as well as *The Crush*) suggests a failure on the part of the doubled hermeneutic quest. If the male "expert" or authority figure is unable to solve the crime, he is also stymied in his quest for the "truth" behind the female enigma. These tongue-in-cheek outcomes on some level elude the "final analysis" of Freudian developmental psychology — as the fatal femmes use the normalizing discourses of science against itself.²²

²² This literal and ironic engagement with psychoanalysis speaks implicitly to the hegemonic status of psychoanalysis within feminist film theory. How can a theorist believably employ psychoanalytic tools to uncover some deeper "truth" behind such obvious tropes as Sharon Stone's flashed "wound" in *Basic Instinct*, or the film's veritable armory of castrating objects? If, as Christian Metz suggests, the cinematic apparatus sets up a simulated "dream-work," how do we

Containment and the Female Serial Killer

A common feminist critique of *film noir* is the way in which the powerful *femme fatale* (like lesbian and gay characters) is consistently defused and/or destroyed by the end of the film. Janey Place describes the generic conventions surrounding the fate of the *femme fatale* in classic *film noir* — women whose strength she claims is expressed visually at the outset (like Catherine Tramell's) through their "dominance in composition, angle, camera movement, and lighting."

The *femme fatale* ultimately loses physical movement, influence over camera movement, and is often actually or symbolically imprisoned...sometimes behind visual bars (*The Maltese Falcon*), sometimes happy in the protection of a lover (*The Big Sleep*), often dead (*Murder My Sweet*, *Out of the Past*, *Gun Crazy*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Double Indemnity*), sometimes symbolically rendered impotent (*Sunset Boulevard*). The ideological operation of the myth (the absolute necessity of controlling the strong, sexual woman) is thus achieved by first demonstrating her dangerous power and its frightening results, then destroying it.²³

Faludi's "take" on the 1980s backlash scenario draws upon this logic. She characterizes many of the anti-feminist fables of the decade as "morality tales in which the "good mother" wins and the independent woman gets punished."²⁴ This description is most apt for a film like *Fatal Attraction*, but also applies directly to *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* and *Body of Evidence* — and to a large extent, *Single White Female* and *The Temp*. In these films (as well as many of the "final girl" scenarios such as *Deceived*, *Sleeping with the Enemy* and other "yuppie thrillers" such as *Pacific Heights* or *Patriot Games*) the white, middle class nuclear family is the "good object" under attack. These films, typically foregrounding cute children, rely on a clear sense of closure, most often with the physical eradication of the threat. In *The Hand that Rocks*

contend theoretically with a diegetic dream scheme which is an explicit and ironic reference to Freud?

²³ Janey Place, "Women in film noir," *Women in Film Noir* (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 45.

²⁴ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 113.

the Cradle, Annabella Sciorra plays the ultimate "good wife" who eliminates DeMornay's threatening "nanny from hell." Watched by her children, she pushes De Mornay out a window to be impaled, witch-like, on the brand-new picket fence outside the family's spacious suburban home.

Yet looking at the cycle in general, there is a tension between finite closure of happy heterosexual coupledness, and the open-ended quality of *Basic Instinct*, with most films falling somewhere between the two extremes. Films like *Poison Ivy*, *Single White Female*, *The Crush*, and *The Temp* are more difficult to place. The fallout from the machinations of the fatal femme in these films is so great that happy endings are not really possible. For example, in *Poison Ivy*, after Drew Barrymore kills the mother and seduces the father of protagonist Sara Gilbert, there is little family left to recuperate. Similarly, in *Single White Female*, while Bridget Fonda finally emerges triumphant, she has little to celebrate: with her boyfriend dead, she is left in need of a new roommate.

If the fatal femmes in the cycle are often de-activated the cycle demonstrates a striking ambivalence about the status of the nuclear family. *The Temp*, for example, is figured around a workaholic male executive (Timothy Hutton) in the process of a divorce; similarly, at the outset of *SWF*, Bridget Fonda breaks up with her boyfriend who has been cheating on her. These scenarios suggest a certain malaise around gender relations that is unsurprising within the contemporary context of high divorce rates. While evil female interlopers into the family unit are able to wreak havoc, the films seem to suggest that the garden was already starting to rot before the snake arrived. Formerly hermetic, "yuppie" homes and gardens are ripped apart from within by graft, sexual impropriety, betrayal, and frenzies of violence.

R. Barton Palmer suggests that historically the *noir* genre is characterized by a negative and pessimistic sensibility, notably around gender dynamics. She suggests that

the refusal of heterosexual coupledness as closure within certain films constitutes a more general refusal of Hollywood's "happy endings."

An important link in these *noir* narratives is what we might call the deconstitution of the couple, a powerful and obvious rejection of that important movement which marks the resolution of so many Hollywood screen conflicts. During the studio period...coupling possessed a number of related meanings which helped the classic narrative reach closure...: the satisfaction of male/female sexual desire, the establishment of the minimal social unit, the ending of adventure for a domesticated life, the elimination of divisive differences between the sexes, and the like.²⁵

This cycle of films demonstrates a tension between what Palmer calls *noir* negativity, and the more common romantic closure of the melodrama. Palmer's discussion of the "deconstitution of the couple" describes a general mood within the films of the cycle, but can be applied most directly to *Basic Instinct* and *Final Analysis*.

Feminist film theorists and Queer Nation protesters commonly critique the requisite unhappy fate of strong, sexual women and/or lesbians in mainstream film. *Basic Instinct* adheres to these conventions to some degree with the convenient deaths of Roxy and Beth. Yet in the end, the ultimate fate of Catherine, the greatest culprit, is still in question. While the pseudo-romantic closure in bed with Nick allows a reading that Catherine has been recuperated into a happy ending of heterosexuality (cynically, "to fuck like minks, raise rugrats, and live happily ever after") the presence of the icepick is a haunting reminder that the story is not yet over. The closure suggested by Place's model is further undercut by the parallel narrative device of Catherine's book. Nick and Catherine constantly bicker over its appropriate ending — and implicitly, that of the film as well. The film's self-conscious preoccupation with authorship and narrative convention highlights the seemingly-oppressive formulas of genre, whether the restored equilibrium of the "happy ending," or the more cynical sensational requirement that "someone always has to die." And while Nick seems to have his way with the former

²⁵ R. Barton Palmer, "Apocalyptic Desire: Film Noir and the Woman's Picture," diss., New York University, 1989, 7-8.

option for the time-being, the icepick bears witness to the feeling played out throughout the film that this is really Catherine's story, and that she will determine its final outcome.

In *Final Analysis*, the outcome is similarly contradictory. Even though Gere is able to eliminate his primary foe, her younger sister emerges to continue the family tradition. In fact, the final sequence of the film has Gere watching powerless as Thurman takes over the "black widow" role of her sister, making the moves to entrap yet another innocent man. Similarly, in *The Crush*, Cary Elwes' psychotic teenaged admirer seems to be confined to a mental hospital for her pranks. Nonetheless, the film ends with her fixating on yet another eligible young man, this time, ironically, her psychiatrist — in the closing shots, she adroitly charms him into finding her "cured" and ready for release.

If the fatal femmes are framed as pathological, they are not contained across the board, as some queer or feminist analysis would suggest. Such a resolution is reminiscent of horror film, where the genre rests on a pattern of obsessive repetition: somehow, Freddy always returns. While the films of this cycle do not normally produce direct sequels (with the possible exception of *Basic Instinct*), the durability of the murderous female is demonstrated by her proliferation across many cloned or connected texts of the cycle. Further, the paranoid invasion of these fatal femmes on screen hints at a plethora of crazy, plotting, murderous women out there waiting in the wings. Such a momentous conspiracy can not be entirely contained.

The films of the cycle are uneasily divided between Faludi's "morality tales" of closure and punishment of the independent women, and these more open endings. All the films, however, are shot through with a certain negativity and malaise around gender relations. The equilibrium of Hollywood's happier genres rarely exists in the first place to be restored. The obsessive return of the powerful female figure suggests a troubling force that cannot be easily contained within the nuclear family. Relations between men and women are thus constituted as a site of struggle. Still, the victor is not so clear-cut

as the “backlash” scenario would have it. Within this cycle (and within popular culture generally, as developed in Chapter 4) one particularly contested area is that of sexual objectification — in this case, filtered through the specular cinematic preoccupation with “the gaze.”

The Gaze

Since the early 1970s, feminist film theory has located the inscription of male power in the cinema both at the level of narrative (as described above) and also at the structural level of cinematic form. In particular, theorists have discussed the predominance of the controlling male gaze. Against this theoretical background, I was fascinated by the shifting functions of the gendered gaze during the immanent analysis of *Basic Instinct*. In retrospect, the film’s highly self-conscious and often ironic play with the gaze is one of the more evocative aspects of the text. Here, at first glance, Catherine’s overt challenge to a whole army of male gazes destabilizes the apparent diegetic and symbolic omnipotence of the male gaze.

For example, the famous interrogation scene confronts the conceptual dichotomy between the active male gaze and passive female object in psychoanalytic film theory. Specifically, when Catherine “bares all” during the interrogation, she seems to halt the “castration complex” so basic to Freud and Mulvey right in its tracks. This highly-dramatic and widely-circulated “pregnant moment” confronts the hypothetical male viewer (both diegetic and extra-diegetic) with his greatest fear: confronting “the lack” straight on. But ultimately, the highly theatrical and ironic quality of the moment satirizes and destabilizes the very underlying “truth claims” of psychoanalysis — and the absolute authority of the male gaze.

The fascination with theatricality in this scene and throughout the film mimics the “woman as spectacle” so central to cinema. Yet this film pushes the dynamic beyond

any pretense of subtlety so that Catherine explicitly manipulates her object-status to her own advantage. The campy quality of "performance" in Catherine's role shifts the discourse around gender from notions of "lack" to what Judith Butler terms "gender as performance." Catherine's play with appearances holds a strong fascination for contemporary feminists of the "pro-sex"²⁶ persuasion, who seek to re-examine relations of power and objectification. This particular tendency in feminist politics intersects with my previous discussion of reading formations and "camp." While because of space constraints I cannot develop this idea further here, this element of performance points to a more fluid model of the gaze, where all power is not always already vested in a static viewer position, but rather circulates through the changing articulations of gender, text, and cinematic technology.

Linda Williams, among many others, has critiqued the Mulveyan model of cinematic relations of looking which is still hegemonic within feminist film theory. With her insistence on the two overlapping "drives" of sadistic scopophilia and fetishism, Mulvey produces a slippage between seemingly ahistorical unconscious processes, and the conventions of the cinematic apparatus. As Williams points out, this conflation has several implicit and profoundly political effects.

Mulvey's analysis thus assumes these perversions to be eternal even as it implies a historically new implementation: of them by cinema. In this formulation, male pleasure-in-looking struggles against the displeasure of the threat of castration in a static realm of iconicity that always constructs the image of the woman as an ultimately reassuring mirror of the man. Patriarchal power invariably wins; the struggle is over before it begins. Power in this analysis is understood only as the narrative power of action, of propulsive movements, a realm that already excludes the woman. In both cases we observe the negative operation of a repressive and

²⁶ This term refers to a general movement within North American feminism to problematize the "anti-sex" tendency of 1970s feminism. In broad terms, the "pro-sex" camp encompasses anti-censorship (often pro-erotica or even "pro-porn" stance); also, this shift in contemporary feminist politics can involve an investigation of S/M dynamics. Such a proliferation of feminist discourses around sexuality connect strongly with Foucault's discussion of "speaking sex" discussed in Chapter 4.

prohibitory power, but not the positive operation of a power that feeds off and constructs further pleasures.²⁷

Through Foucault's notion of the historical "implantation of perversions," Williams historicizes cinematic conventions such as the predominant organizing principle of the male gaze described so evocatively by Mulvey. This reformulation is significant, for it suggests a more flexible and historically-contingent quality to cinematic inscriptions of gendered subjectivity. The concept of "implantation of [cinematic] perversions" implies a greater possibility for modifying power dynamics within cinematic form. Also, it goes much further toward accounting for the changing dynamics of the gaze in contemporary Hollywood cinema — and specifically some of the inconsistencies and contradictions within the gendered gaze of *Basic Instinct*.

If one remains inside the logic of the meta-subject of psychoanalysis, any rupture in the gendered subject/ object split becomes exceedingly important and necessarily subversive — as, in fact, I have implied thus far in my analysis of the modalities of the gendered gaze in *Basic Instinct*. And without a doubt, the visceral impact of Catherine's returned look and "flash" of pussy provides a testimony to the ongoing dominance of a Mulveyan convention in Hollywood cinema. However, as I pointed out within the immanent analysis, this moment does not erupt spontaneously as some aberration in cinematic form, but derives, at least in part, from an articulation of different genres and conventions of spectacle. In Chapter 2, I noted how contemporary films typically mobilize generically hybrid forms. In this case, the borrowing of the pornographic convention of the "pussy shot" by mainstream cinema speaks more to shifting moral/ cinematic taste codes than to castration. The sensationalism of this moment operates at once to

²⁷ Linda Williams, Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 43.

destabilize any broad generalizations about the castration complex, and to sell more movie tickets.

Turning to the other films of the cycle, *Basic Instinct*'s theatrical elements, the returned gaze, and the seeming empowerment of the object are aspects of a shifting terrain of cinematic gender conventions — conventions which are not, I might point out, intrinsically feminist. This became clear to me after seeing *Sliver* (1993), Sharon Stone's next film after *Basic Instinct*. Another yuppie thriller where Stone plays prey rather than predator, *Sliver* promises to up the ante of *Basic Instinct*'s sensational theatricality. Here, the mirrored glances and obsession with spectacle and voyeurism of the first film are elaborated into a whole wall of monitors which constantly document the private lives of a whole apartment building. *Sliver*'s publicity campaign leads with a provocative subtitle: "You like to watch, don't you?" And while the film's primary voyeur is William Baldwin, a none-too-subtle gender twist has Stone transfixed by high-powered instruments of voyeurism including a telescope and Baldwin's video monitors. A sensational instance of meaningless reversal, this Esterhaz script manages an "equal opportunities"/ equal responsibility line on voyeurism. Such a fascination with surveillance and voyeurism occurs in other recent films also, notably Atom Egoyan's more critical work, Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape* (1989), and *Batman* (1989).

This 1980s and 1990s fascination with surveillance and sexuality articulates with the Foucauldian concept of the *scientia sexualis*. According to Williams, this larger trend toward the obsessive recording of human sexuality has been incorporated into the very fabric of cinematic form. Shifting discourses around the highly-charged categories of transgressive sexuality register as new "implantations of perversions" in contemporary film and popular culture. The most explicit example of this can be found in *Body of Evidence*. In the opening scene, the leather-clad Madonna character masturbates noisily in the middle of a large room, while a prone, naked older man in bondage watches her

through a video monitor. Just as he comes, he experiences massive coronary arrest, and expires with his dead eyes still trained on the video monitor. Meanwhile, the tape of Madonna in action plays on, unconcerned. A trial ensues to decide whether this was murder or just "unclean" fun. Inevitably, the court (and especially the defence lawyer, Willem Dafoe) explore the fascinating subject of Madonna's sexual conduct.

Body of Evidence exemplifies some of the contradictory elements of the gaze which circulate through this cycle of films. Madonna, a multi-millionaire and exhibitionist trend-setter in her own right, is framed by an overlapping series of mediated gazes. Her economic clout and major star status seem to establish Madonna as the author of her own objectification.

Both the Sharon Stone and Madonna star personas project the figure of the sexually-voracious woman with an attitude. The dynamic of power in these films extends beyond the diegetic relations of looking. In fact, the star/ strong female character's provocative returned gaze is bolstered up by a whole range of social and economic powers. While the sexual power of the vamp is no new theme in itself, this contemporary version articulates significantly with broader "post-feminist" discourses of economic and social power. In *Basic Instinct*, Catherine's show-stopping returned gaze and manipulations of her object status are supported by her much-cited *magna cum laudae* degree in psychology, her public career as a bestselling novelist, and of course, her bank roll: When considering whether to bring Catherine in to the station for questioning, one of the police remarks that there is little point since she could just "buy the whole place anyway."

Throughout the cycle, consistently absurd levels of economic and social power attributed to the fatal femmes facilitate a related reversal of the gender dynamics of surveillance and objectification. In several films of the cycle, the direction of the obsessive gaze of male desire is coyly reversed, or at least tampered with. Not merely

"objects with an attitude," other fatal femmes of the cycle become omniscient voyeurs. For Lara Flynn Boyle, the means to the top is via her recently-divorced boss (Timothy Hutton). She keeps tabs on him through an impressive array of common office technologies such as the computer, answering machine, and photocopier. In fact, the whole notion of "surveillance" in this film and others of the cycle moves beyond the mere realm of the specular, into the many-splendoured mediations of electronic communication.²⁸

In *The Crush*, the teenaged psycho (Alicia Silverstone) is a well-heeled, overly-intelligent rich kid who develops a crush on her parents' new tenant (Cary Elwes). Silverstone's "controlling gaze" is foregrounded in the accompanying movie poster/standard print media advertisement. It features a closeup of the teenager, tinted with a girlish pink wash; the visual emphasis of the ad is on her heart-shaped sunglasses with twin images of Elwes reflected in the dark lenses. As in *The Temp*, the 14-year-old Silverstone marshals a surprising range of advanced technologies to keep her love-object under surveillance. She carries her high-powered binoculars everywhere, calls her "crush" repeatedly on her cellular phone, and effortlessly accesses his computer files to erase valuable records. Because of her status as daughter of the landlord, she has a key to the Elwes' home, commonly walking in without warning, including just after he has sex with his girlfriend.

The implied, almost unlimited surveillance capacity of the fatal femmes translates into a weird almost superhuman "omniscience." In all of the films, the all-knowing female

²⁸ The importance of electronic surveillance devices within these films points to a consistent problem with psychoanalytic film theory's obsession with specular relations. While this body of theory deals in painstaking detail with the many overlapping visual fields within the cinematic apparatus, it is often at a loss to account for other elements — and how they interact with the specular. Similarly, the films' explicit engagement with multiple mediations within popular culture and everyday life suggests another gap in psychoanalytic theory: notably, the breakdown of "classic" cinematic viewing relations in favour of more fragmented and diverse interactions between "text" and "viewer."

seems to be able to control the life and even the gaze of the male hero, even while she is not on screen. For example, Catherine Tramell arranges for Nick to watch her undress, even when she ostensibly doesn't know he can see her (as when Nick and Gus come to pick her up for interrogation, or when he arrives at her beach house unannounced). A similar dynamic can be traced through *Poison Ivy*, *The Crush*, and *The Temp*. The fatal femmes seem to consciously set themselves up as objects of desire for the male gaze. This framing, as in *Body of Evidence*, posits the fatal femme as the mistress of technology, and the force for the desiring gaze to reckon with in. Yet in a final reframing, these seemingly omniscient fatal femmes are still the main object of desire on screen — only one or two points of view removed from Marilyn Monroe *et al.*

Taking the argument one step further, this seeming all-knowing female gaze on the part of the fatal femmes is largely tempered by other relations of power. One striking example is the extraordinary reversal where Roxy (jealously) watches the “fuck of the century” between Nick and Catherine. In a classic reframing of the conventional viewing relations of pornography, the lesbian becomes audience for the heterosexual sex act. However, within the constraints of narrative convention, this reversal can only go so far. Even though Catherine stresses Roxy's virility to her male lovers, Roxy is clearly unable to compete with Nick's “wand.” Ultimately, Roxy is marked for elimination by her “authentic” lesbianism and by her working class origins. Similarly, in the other films of the cycle, it is the women with less social power who are consistently eradicated: the working class teenager in *Poison Ivy*; the widowed nanny in *Hand that Rocks the Cradle*; the mysterious and disturbed roommate in *Single White Female*; and the drifting “black widow” in *Body of Evidence*.

These examples illuminate some of the complexity in assessing the power dynamics of the gendered gaze within this cycle. Clearly, an understanding of power in cinema cannot be reduced to an analysis of the gaze. A seeming reversal of point-of-

view or voyeurism does not immediately produce a feminist text. On some level, while seeming to add a new twist to gender relations and objectification, the films actually provide themselves with an alibi. The promulgation of powerful "überfrau" anti-heroines with guts, brains, bucks, education, and looks partially serves to mask the ongoing regularity of women's overrepresentation as object in front of the camera and underrepresentation behind the camera. In terms of sexual objectification and the gaze, these characters are able to look back because they (mythically) have access to so much other social power. The potential vulnerability of the woman as object of the gaze so central to theoretical and lived feminist discourses is cancelled out by the character's combined resources.

In part, the reversals of traditional gaze dynamics in these films can be attributed to a larger shift in cinematic conventions. Broader discourses around female sexuality and power intersect with constantly-evolving "implantations of perversions" within cinema. If Mulvey's account of the sadistic male gaze is based on a repressive scripting of powerful and powerless agents, these current variations in cinematic convention are best explained through Foucault's notion of the productivity of power. Contemporary social preoccupations with sexuality and voyeurism interact with the more classic cinematic model to produce more and more variations on these themes within the cinema. While not all of these variations are necessarily "liberating" for women (or really particularly "new"), the wider range and explicit engagement with viewing relations provide some important new points of insertion for different viewers and reading formations. As suggested in the immanent analysis and in the preceding chapter, I find that *Basic Instinct* offers some of these moments. Never straightforward or unproblematic, still even the most hackneyed of cultural texts offer surprising threads of openness, unexpected moments of rupture and reversal.

Concluding Thoughts

I began this thesis by mapping out the significance of this cycle of films as a striking exception to common socio-cultural discourses which figure women as eternally passive victims. Through the shocking figure of the fatal femme, I sought to critique and move beyond the repressive power dynamic implicit within the violence against women rhetoric of popular feminism. Gradually, though, I found that an unqualified championing of the "violent femme" through thick and thin, through pathology and multiple murders, could trap my analysis within the same binary either/ or logic common to the violence against women position. By pitting the exception against the rule, the subversive text against the oppressive one, I tended toward a similarly closed analytical framework as the Queer Nation or "anti-feminist lie" arguments. Ultimately, the two opposing positions work within the logic of closed and ultimately coherent cultural texts, and static generic and social formations against which to measure them.

In more specific relation to film theory, common feminist scholarship on classic *film noir* sets up key tautologies (between the "good" and "bad" woman, or between rupture and containment). Another exception/ rule formulation, such a dialectic relies on a "fixed" generic context and a particular social formation. In contrast to such a polemic, the critical analysis of popular texts must always be positioned in relation to shifting conventions of production and genericity (such as irony and postmodern "hyperconscious eclecticism"), and movements within the social field more generally (increasingly commercial and explicit "speaking sex"; women's shifting relations to social, sexual, and economic powers).

Within this thesis, I have continually opted for discursive and social positioning of cultural texts, for complicating all questions beyond dichotomies of good text/ bad text or empowerment/ oppression. Instead, I have productively mapped out the specific lines of flight which flow commonly through cultural texts and broader social discourses. In the

immanent analysis, I traced out some of the absolutely complex and multiple voicings in the banal and overtly commercial *Basic Instinct*. With the subsequent discussion of transgressive sexuality and sexual representation, I mapped out the multiple openings within the text as a counterpoint to Queer Nation's closed and didactic reading. Further, I highlighted the centrality of irony in the text, and suggested one particular instance of a "queer" reading formation which can work with or even appropriate elements of the contentious text. Finally, in this concluding chapter, I explored several other lines of flight which flow around the figure of the fatal femme. By looking at questions of violence, psychoanalysis, containment, and the gaze, I addressed some of the ambiguities of the powers vested in the fatal femme. These overlapping discussions of the complex and productive aspects of women's physical, economic, and social powers within this cycle of films complicate many assumptions about power which circulate in popular and theoretical feminist writings.

This thesis has not taken a linear line of argument. The form just plum doesn't lend itself to neat conclusions. In these final paragraphs I still cannot easily sum up the meaning and significance of the fatal femme. In retrospect, I have worked in concentric arcs around this loaded question, marking out the limitations of political (literal "positive images" readings of texts) and theoretical (psychoanalytic film theory) territories which often seem overused and inadequate to the project. Touching again and again on the vague terms of "power" and "violence," this project has allowed me to establish some of the limits of these constructs. Ultimately, this lengthy meditation on the problems of power and violence in this cycle has brought me to conclude that there is a great need for more precise work in these areas. A breaking down of these expansive terms would be in order — a cataloguing and specifying of the multiple elements which each evokes. In particular, I still find that the problem of women's burgeoning physicality (a more specific relation of bodies and force than "violence" *per se*) in contemporary popular film

needs closer attention. Also, I feel that the pressing problem of the representation of "violent femmes" and violence against women requires a great deal more careful scrutiny, both within the cinema and in relation to other media; this complex work on representation, moreover, needs to speak to parallel discussions in sociology and policy development.

This project of synthesis has provided a productive opportunity to work through the limits of the critical tools available, particularly in film theory. Part of the methodological challenge of the thesis was to create new strategies of film criticism. In terms of this project, I find that the creative spirit of the "immanent analysis" holds considerable promise for a tactile-yet-critical approach to film. Such an innovation suggests a slim beginning, but there is still a great need for more flexible, imaginative, and risk-taking approaches to film analysis and the writing of theory.

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APPENDIX: FILMOGRAPHY

The Fatal Femme Cycle

Basic Instinct (1992) dir. Michael Verhoeven, w. Sharon Stone, Michael Douglas, George Dzundza, Jeanne Tripplehorn, Leilani Sarelle, Dorothy Malone.

Body of Evidence (1993) dir. Uli Edel, w. Madonna, Willem Dafoe, Anne Archer

The Crush (1993) dir. Alan Shapiro, w. Cary Elwes, Alicia Silverstone, Jennifer Rubin

Final Analysis (1991) dir. Phil Joanou, w. Richard Gere, Kim Basinger, Uma Thurman

The Hand That Rocks the Cradle (1991) dir. Curtis Hanson, w. Rebecca de Mornay, Annabella Sciorra, Matt McCoy

Poison Ivy, (1992) dir. Katt Shea Rubin, w. Drew Barrymore, Tom Skerritt, Sara Gilbert, Cheryl Ladd

Single White Female (1992). dir. Barbet Shroeder, w. Bridget Fonda, Jennifer Jason Leigh.

The Temp (1993) dir. Tom Holland, w. Timothy Hutton, Lara Flynn Boyle, Faye Dunaway

The "Final Girl" Cycle

Blue Steel (199) dir. Kathryn Bigelow. w. Jamie Lee Curtis, Ron Silver, Clancy Brown, Elizabeth Peña

Dead Again (1991) dir. Kenneth Branagh w. Emma Thompson, Kenneth Branagh, Andy Garcia

Dead Bolt (1992) w. Justine Bateman, Adam Baldwin

Deceived (1991) dir. Damian Harris, w. Goldie Hawn, John Heard, Robin Bartlett

A Kiss Before Dying (1991) dir. James Dearden, w. Matt Dillon, Sean Young, Max von Sydow, Diane Ladd

Jennifer Eight (1992) w. Andy Garcia, Uma Thurman

Love Crimes (1992) dir. Lizzie Borden, w. Sean Young

Mortal Thoughts (1991) dir. Alan Rudolph, w. Demi Moore, Glenn Headly, Bruce Willis, John Pankow

Sleeping with the Enemy (1991) dir. Joseph Ruben, w. Julia Roberts, Patrick Bergin, Kevin Anderson