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Revolting Doubles:

Radical Narcissism and the Trope of Lesbian *Doppelgangers*

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## **Abstract**

This article is concerned with a repositioning of popular culture images and narratives that are, and have been, highly unpopular among queer audiences. This involves a re-engagement with the visual representation of lesbian lovers as doubles, ubiquitous in popular culture. It argues that by positioning the trope of the lesbian *doppelgangers* as it appears in popular culture on a continuum of visual representations of sameness and likeness that also includes feminist and queer art its qualities of radical or 'absolute' narcissism are brought to the fore to be enjoyed as a subversive statement of highly self-referencing, auto-erotic and self-sufficient economy of desire. In a reading of *Black Swan* (2010), a film that has attracted notable negative responses from feminist critics, it discusses how radical narcissism disturbs the heteronormative matrix through a refusal of its underpinning organisation of desire and identification as exclusionary. It closes by engaging with contemporary artworks drawing on the *doppelganger* motif.

## **Keywords**

Queer uncanny, *doppelganger*, popular culture, visual culture, sameness, narcissism

‘Narcissism?...It’s one of my finest qualities!’

(Claude Cahun cited in Latimer 2005: 93)

‘the core of our fantasy is unbearable to us’

(Slavoj Zizek 2006: 56)

Inspired by the contributions to the 2011 Lesbian Lives Conference and this Special Issue as a whole, this article takes as its starting point two specific incitements that have moved me to reflect on ‘revolting bodies’ in my own research on the representation of lesbians in contemporary visual and popular culture: Joan Nestle’s stress on the importance to her of ‘finding and keeping alive counter narratives to historical certainties, both in ...dominant national culture and in my own communities’ (Nestle 2011) and Heather Love’s (2011) pointing toward the importance of engaging also with the most detested (by LGBT audiences) of texts because of the shame, backwardness or homo- and/or transphobia they represent.

In this category of *unpopular* popular culture we find the ubiquitous narratives and images of the lesbian look-alikes or *doppelganger* that are rarely openly loved by queer audiences because of their frequent appearance within homophobic representations of lesbians as variably infantile, psychotic and sterile. As Love (2004: 129) reflects, ‘for contemporary lesbians socially regressive desires... are perhaps the greatest taboo’. This article traces some of those ‘regressive desires’ to explore what seeking an affective engagement with – rather than purging of – these often misogynist and homophobic

images of queer women can produce in terms of 'counter narratives to historical certainties'. Teresa de Lauretis (2011: 250) has recently turned to the tension in contemporary queer politics between sociability and sexuality, probing the question of how we can 'think queer bonds together with the counter-social forces at work in them', particularly 'in these times, when civil rights and the pursuit of happiness are deemed to inhere in the socially reproductive couple' (258). This makes the figure of the narcissistic lesbian, marked as deeply anti-social, the counter narrative to our current state of politics.

My previous research on queer politics and genre concerns itself with the politics of form, focusing in particular on those instances where the political or dissident gesture is located not in the subject matter but in the aesthetic or stylistic form. The narcissistic lesbian doubles, I suggest here, can be understood as a formalised trope or visual spectacle but its possible political gesture is often overlooked. This article explores how the narcissistic doubles work to embody, enjoy and assert uncomfortable strangeness, and ambivalences by reminding what ought to have remained hidden where dominant culture wants reassurance, intelligibility and integrity to be evident and transparent.

### **Looking and Looking Like**

Popular culture of different kinds – from fashion photography to advertising, TV, cinema and porn – is full of images dramatized by the fantasy of female lovers that look the same. Barbara Creed (1995) has noted a privileging of the

image of the lesbian couple as 'look-alike' in both fashion photography and mainstream pornography. Sometimes these 'lesbian doubles' are eroticised, sometimes vilified; eroticized of course in pornographic representations, but similar examples can be found in a range of media including drama, advertising and reality TV (for example in MTV's *A Double Shot at Love*, 2008-09).<sup>1</sup> Such imagery often emphasizes hegemonic femininity and is generally seen as conforming to and serving a male voyeuristic erotic economy.

However, sometimes the lesbian *doppelgangers* appear rather more sinister, such as the murderous lesbian lovers Catherine and Roxy in the 1992 film *Basic Instinct*, a film that has been given a lot of attention due to its negative representation of lesbian and bisexual women (see Galvin, 1994; Kitzinger and Kitzinger, 1993: 10; Reichert and Melcher, 1999) or the tragic / sadistic *doppelganger* character Diane in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) who driven by jealousy has her lover Camilla killed and then commits suicide; their deaths producing a traumatic imprint in the lives of later generation lesbian lovers Betty and Rita (played by the same actresses). In these representations, lesbian doubles are often either aggressive or psychotic, and positively dangerous. Both these films also play out the familiar plot of the triangular romantic drama where 'the woman who discards a woman for a man stands in for the glamour of mobile desire, while the "committed lesbian" represents the horror of a fixed but impossible object choice' (Love, 2004: 123). In her excellent reading of *Mulholland Drive* Heather Love shows that 'In showing Betty as Diane's imaginary alter ego [both roles played by Naomi

Watts], Lynch reveals the idealized image of the lesbian to be a ghostly effect produced by the social impossibility of lesbianism.’ (2004: 124) The ‘dark shadow she cannot shake’ Love argues, is the abject lesbian produced through the ‘*structural effect* of homophobia, one of the tragic others that modernity produces with...alarming regularity’ (2004: 130). Similarly Terry Castle (1993: 7) has theorized how the ghostliness of sexual love between women, expelled by ‘the forces of heterosexual propriety’, haunts Western culture. In her *The Apparitional Lesbian* she demonstrates how in canonized texts from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the figure of the ghostly double functions as an uncanny articulation of the erotic bond between women. That is, once the lesbians have been ‘turned “into” ghost’ and this association became culturally recognized, the reversed dynamics occur and ghosts ‘get turned into lesbians’ (Castle 1993: 46).

Either voyeuristically eroticized, tragic or murderous, lots of people would see the types of representations described earlier as highly misogynist and homophobic or at the very least as a complete ‘misrepresentation’ of lesbian and bisexual women. But these images cannot be dismissed as just misogynist and homophobic. Queer popular culture and lesbian lore are full of representations depicting lesbian lovers as doubles and, as Bonnie Zimmerman (1992) has shown, attraction based on sameness is a staple romantic convention in lesbian fiction (see Jenzen 2011). The visual trope of the doubles is repeated in queer and feminist art as well, from Gluck’s famous work ‘Medallion’ (1937) and the work of Surrealist artists Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, to contemporary artist Barbara Hammer’s *Nitrate Kisses*

(1992), Zanele Muholi's *Being* (2007) and Sadie Lee's portraits to which I will return later in the article. More to the point, as Love notes, because the figure of the lesbian 'is so overwritten by cliché, the central criterion for judging lesbian representation tends to be whether it challenges reigning clichés of the lesbian or capitulates to them' (2004: 121) when in fact any representation of lesbianism is always in part produced through the dominant discourse of 'male fantasy'. However, if we conceptualise the images of the lesbian *doppelgangers* as existing on a continuum rather than as separated by their belonging to different cultural spheres (straight/ queer, male / female, mainstream / subculture) we see how they fail to be contained in their misogynist and homophobic or indeed utopian framing. To use Judith Butler's (1993: 23) words, these images effect 'a failure in the workings of the inevitable law' and by doing so offer 'an enabling disruption, the occasion for a radical rearticulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all.'

The erotic dynamism between the lesbian doubles draws on both eroticised sameness (being one) and likeness (resemblance) and the two aspects underwrite each other. This disruption of desire and identification as exclusionary is in itself erotically invested in. The figure of the lovers as doubles thus evokes a feeling of uncanny repetition as well as a sensation of an uncanny threat to the boundaries of the proper categories of the self and the other, caused by excessive identification that is also erotic and that brought to its completion would lead to annihilation of the subject or psychosis.

Noting the uncanny or haunting qualities that are associated with repetition (Jenzen 2007) the article also attempts to draw out the counter narrative of queer negativity symbolised by the association of the doubles to autoeroticism (which is non-reproductive), and the darker side of how the twinned lovers' refusal of the desire / identification dichotomy threatens to violate the boundaries of the subject. As noted above, the figure of the lesbian doubles is paradoxically coded both 'sexy' and antisocial. The negative figure of the antisocial and counter cultural lesbian can be traced to its connection with narcissism, typically related to a range of psycho-pathological conditions. The association of homosexuality to narcissism has historically served as a way to reinforce the pathologization of dissident sexuality. This association also positions homosexuality as non-productive and non-contributing to society. These are cultural anxieties that continue to surface in popular culture, exemplified by Hollywood films such as *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) or more recently Darren Aronofsky's Oscar winning *Black Swan* (2010), films that to varying degrees collapse the figure of the narcissistic female and the psychotic lesbian.

By refusing the idea of identification and desire as exclusionary, and flaunting their indifference to difference, lesbian lovers figured as doubles undermine certainties about gender, sexuality and desire everywhere they appear in popular culture. Here the affinity to sameness, repetition and the circular, mark the abject, revolting quality of the mirroring. These images are uncanny in their dramatic double nature and in their semantic instability and, as I will go



on to discuss, once articulated cannot be fully re-appropriated by the hetero gaze.

Freud defines narcissism as 'the libido that has been withdrawn from the external world' and 'directed to the ego' (1991: 67).<sup>2</sup> Further he differentiates between two types of narcissism (Freud, 1991: 66-7). Primary narcissism is a basic, sexually charged desire directed at the self as part of a cluster of self-preserving desires, or ego-instincts, such as shielding the self from dangers and sustaining the self through feeding oneself (Freud, 1991: 66). This type of narcissistic impulse is part of all humans' psyche. Secondary narcissism on the other hand is the pathological variation and constitutes an imbalance in the (dualist) Freudian libidinal economy based on a relation of antithesis between outward directed libido and inward directed libido, or 'ego-libido' and 'object-libido' (1991: 68). Also, beyond psychoanalysis, narcissism has been discursively coded female and queer, as the other of good sexuality. In Freud's 'On Narcissism' (1991 [1914]) woman is positioned as 'Other' not because of her inherent lack but because of her narcissism expressed as an indifference towards men (or her potential to achieve this state of indifference). This state of indifference makes her inconceivable in the heteronormative logic and thus she becomes a threat. Both Primary and Secondary narcissism seem to conflate in discourse that produces homosexuality as rooted in the subject's arrestment in the narcissistic stage of ego development and as non-complying to the mutually exclusionary desire / identification structure that underpins heteronormative libidinal economy and construction of gender. The numerous fictional and non-fictional depictions of lesbian sexuality as a 'step

on the road to adult heterosexuality' (Thynne, 1995:104) testify to this commonplace association of lesbianism and narcissism. Narcissism's association with non-reproductive sexuality, mentioned above also makes it emblematic of homosexuality. An inherent contradiction in the concept of narcissism is how it is fundamentally a drive that shelters the self yet, as Edelman (2004: 52) argues, 'designate[s] a life-denying economy' and thus because narcissism is seen as constituent of homosexuality it connects the death drive to the queer as signifying the non-reproductive and un-live. From this the figure of the lesbian lovers as doubles emerges as the crux of narcissistic manifestation, as it brings together the female ego-libido and non-reproductive death drive. Thus feminine narcissism and narcissistic homoeroticism merge, described by Claude Cahun as 'two narcissisms drowning together', the double stigma merging into one signifier (Latimer, 2005: 92).

### **Indifferent to difference**

The figure of the doubles disturbs the notion of sexual identity as it is determined by a notion of the self as a modern discursive construction. This is a binary construction of the self that discursively depends on the category of the non-self; the other – not just as separate from the self, but as different. It is this heterosexist epistemology, which presumes a particular relation to the other (see Dean, 2001: 120) that the figure of the double unsettles. The unsettling can be understood through the notion of the uncanny, which for

Freud (1919) does not simply concern the otherness of the unknown but importantly includes *the otherness of the known and the familiar*.

In the case of the lesbian doubles the relation to the other is transgressed if not more or less completely collapsed. Sameness becomes the central structure of desire. The refusal of the desire / identification dichotomy as uncanny is played out in films as different as *All about Eve* (1950), *Persona* (1966), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), *Single White Female* (1992), the recent Swedish off-beat coming-of-age drama *She Monkeys* (2011) and in various other texts with an impersonator themed plot.<sup>3</sup> These are often tragic tales of repressed homosexuality or concern themselves with male imaginations of the 'mysterious' and precarious nature of women's relation to other women. Arguably however, they also provide cinematic representations of the terrors that haunt patriarchy, the queer uncanny that seeps through its seams. The uncanny, as Rosemary Jackson (1981: 70) has argued, 'expresses drives which have to be repressed for the sake of cultural continuity', such as the preference of ego-libido over object-libido or the eroticisation of sameness. We see the theme of abject narcissism being developed in Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) a highly stylised psychological thriller that merges the genres of melodrama and body horror. The film follows young ballerina Nina Sayers as she pushes herself physically and psychologically to leave her mid-ranking position in the dance troop and secure a lead role in their production of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. The symbolism of how she tortures her own body to achieve success in the microcosmos that is the world of the ballet is a thinly veiled metaphor for the

conditions of patriarchy. The role she will be dancing involves playing two parts – the swan and its destructive twin the ‘black swan’. She masters the first part of the role through technical skill but the other part requires a dramatized sexual expression that she can’t exhibit. She is shown as sternly controlled by her mother and as uninterested in sex – frigid. Her breakdown is already underway when she meets Lily a newly arrived ballerina with a competitive attitude and self-confident sexuality. ‘He made me your alternate’ Lily announces to Nina about the Director’s casting of her as the understudy for the swan role. As this line suggests, the relationship revolves around the eroticization of sameness as the two become one in the same stage role, but it also plays on the difference implied in the white / black swan dichotomy.

*Black Swan* received mixed critical responses, but notably incensed feminist critics and audiences. Amber Jacob’s description of the film as ‘reproduce[ing], romanticiz[ing], and condon[ing]’ the ‘terms of the Western male imaginary’, and ‘replete with porn clichés’ that can only serve ‘the pleasure of the heterosexual male spectator’, demonstrates this with some emphasis (Fisher and Jacobs, 2011: 59, 60).

Nevertheless, in the spirit of Mabel Hampton whose enjoyment of the 1929 play *The Captive* Joan Nestle delicately brings to us, and how Hampton took pleasure from what was intended as a cautionary tale about the perils of a lesbian lifestyle, I engage with Aronofsky’s *Black Swan*, as one - by feminists - very unloved film.

Attentive to the gaps and fissures of its semiotic texture we can see that the dark tale of *Black Swan* is not monolithic in its condoning of the patriarchal

imaginary (indeed it seems to signal a sharp awareness of the male gaze by imbedding it in the text as personified in the masturbating man harassing Nina on the underground train), and though it can indeed be read as a nightmare vision, this could be one as perceived from within a patriarchal logic – haunted by the notion of being rendered redundant. In this sense Aronofsky turns patriarchy into a tragic parody, the volatile nature of its clichés laid bare. As the film progresses Nina’s increasingly precarious grip on reality is in part driven by her involvement with Lily. Her fascination with Lily develops in tandem with her fear that Lily will take her place and the paranoia builds, the story moves between different planes of reality. By the time the relationship becomes more overtly sexual there is a clear double existence in terms of what is Nina’s internal reality and the film’s main diegesis. This is significant in relation to Nina and Lily’s construction as narcissistic lovers. Their falling for each other is also a falling into each other that collapses the boundary between where one person’s subjectivity ends and the other’s begins. As pointed out by Fisher, her relationship to other women is ‘either hostile or so annihilatingly close that Nina can’t distinguish herself from them’, however Jacobs finds the depiction of the relation between the women negative and pathologizing when the bond is ‘characterized by merging’ (Fisher and Jacobs, 2011: 59), thus manifesting the view that women can only achieve subjectivity through difference. The narcissistic lesbian relation refuses these terms on which subjectivity is conceptualized thus enacting a queer ethics that ‘decline intelligibility’ (Edelman 2004:106).

For Nina the desiring Lily is inseparable from the pleasure of 'being' Lily and the public fantasy of the lesbian *doppelgangers* merges with her private fantasy. Thus lesbianism marks the moving in and out of different ontologies. Lily is either not fully aware of or prepared to acknowledge the distinctions between 'real life', stage life, or the phantasmic realm of her inner world. The juxtaposition of narrative modes such as progressing/static, realistic/fantastical, logical/chaotic, coherent/disjointed works in the film to represents the reality-fracturing nature of trauma as Nina's sense of self starts to disintegrate. At the point of her performance premier, as Mark Fisher notes, 'Nina's madness is no longer controllable. It cannot be contained either by Nina *or by the film itself.*' (Fisher and Jacobs, 2011: 58, my italics) The film, which constitutes a popular culture double to the Tchaikovskian ballet, seems to suggest that it is its hyperbolic affective register we need to tune in to, to experience the 'distanceless proximity' (Irigaray in Fisher and Jacobs, 2011: 62) of its characters. Significantly though, there isn't a singular reality that emerges as authentic or true as the film comes to a close. There is no privileging of the 'authentic' over the clichéd and there is no privileging of actuality over fantasy. Neither tragedy nor rebellion is fully enacted. Departing from other representations of the tragic lesbian whose desire is for a lost love object, in *Black Swan* her object of desire is not fully lost. This is indicated in Lily's willingness to, at least momentarily, be part of Nina's alternative 'reality' – where they are lovers – revealed in her reaction to Nina's account of the (hallucinated?) night they spent having sex when she asks 'Was I good?' This

holds in tension the two implied questions: 'Did I satisfy you?' / 'Was I there?' but is not a rejection or outright denial of them as lovers.

The over-proximity of Nina and Lily corresponds to the proximity of lesbian desire and the death-drive, which makes *Black Swan* a film surprisingly attuned to, by Hollywood standards, the 'dark places of affective and erotic life', something that Love (2004: 129) identifies as notably absent in contemporary lesbian political debate typified by a life affirmative 'forward thinking'. Nina's awakening to her sexuality does not lead to a stable lesbian identity but to the disintegrating of her sense self and death. Here the uncanniness of the lesbian doubles derives from the way it approximates or enacts the death drive. With her declining mental state Nina approximates the well known staple character of popular culture, the 'psychotic queer woman' – a figure that haunts dominant culture, as Christine E. Coffman (2006: 6) discusses in her work on Hollywood cinema where, she argues, psychotic queerness is translated into the figure of the murderous sexually dissident woman. This fantasy is ubiquitous:

The association of the psychotic lesbian's ostensible narcissism with tendency toward aggression appears again and again throughout the twentieth century, from the spectacular physical violence of the contemporary films to the milder, though no less disturbing, psychical violence of the early twentieth-century texts (Coffman 2006: 17).

In contrast to Bram Dijkstra (1996: 284) who argues that images of unhinged murderous women can but 'solidify' misogyny, Coffman points to the queer practice of embracing the notion of the abject, insane woman by radical lesbian writing and culture as a form of resistance. However, as Love (2004)

argues, it is increasingly questionable whether there is room in the domain of LGBTQ politics and culture to engage – especially erotically or affectively – with revolting or abject queer bodies. The undomesticated, dissident female sexuality continues to haunt mainstream popular culture though and as this article proposes the affective re-attachment to the cliché of the double as a valuable form of resistance may involve a re-engagement with those ‘unpopular’ texts.

### **Radical narcissism**

In *Black Swan* the theme of narcissism is set by evoking its most central of symbolisms: the mirror image. It does so with the grand and unambiguous gesture of a Hollywood production. The trope of the mirror is everywhere; in the apartment, in the dressing room at the theatre and of course in the dance studio with its walls covered in mirrors. The mirroring is evoked both as a cliché and used as a visual cue to depict in increasingly distorted camera shots Nina’s world as it folds in on itself. Its effect is uncanny as we doubt our own vision; as we are not sure which one of the double versions she is, we don’t know what to believe of the whole narrative. The camera shows her as increasingly fragmented and multiplied by emphasizing the mirrors in kaleidoscope style shots. In a highly expressive gesture the end involves Nina pushing a shard of broken mirror into her stomach whilst performing the dance finale where stage role and reality merge in her actual death. It also raises the question of what happens to the clichéd visual trope of the narcissistic female, once it has quite literally been done to death? Both the



visual language and mis-en-scene are overstated in their use of multiple mirrors and reflections and in an alternating way both engages and frustrates referential expectations. But its abundant use of mirror shots is also an intertextual reference to a longstanding tradition within popular culture and art to use the mirror trope as shorthand for lesbian eroticism.<sup>4</sup> Dijkstra (1986) has shown that in early 20<sup>th</sup> century art, lesbian eroticism was often portrayed through the image of the double and in particular commonly depicted as a mirror reflection, typified by works such as Fernand Khnopff's 'The Kiss' (c. 1887) or Antoine Magaud's 'A Kiss in the Glass' (c. 1885). These visual compositions were seen as expressing lesbian women's 'supposed autoerotic fixation', a heightened and perverted form of feminine narcissism present in all women (Dijkstra 1986: 152). Speculating about the root of the fascination for the (presumed male) artist or spectator, Dijkstra suggests that these motifs reflect prevalent objectification of women – the denial of their individuality evident in the duplication created by the mirror effect. But they also represent the more traumatic discovery of women's autoerotic capabilities of satisfying themselves sexually. The image of a woman embracing her reflection, he argues, 'became the turn of the century's emblem of her enmity toward man, the iconic sign of her obstructive perversity' that in extension would potentially risk death of civilization (Dijkstra 1986: 150). The image of the woman engulfed in her mirror reflection thus also signifies the lesbian couple as existing outside male libidinal economy.

That conscious play with the mirror image cliché may be seen in the lesbian surrealist artist Claude Cahun's 1928 self-portrait in which she stands up-

close to a mirror but instead of embracing the reflection, looking in to the mirror, her gaze meets that of the viewer.<sup>5</sup> The gaze of her reflection falls into the distance and marks a distinct disinterest in the spectator. In this image the trope of the narcissistic lesbian is directly referenced but also mocked and the established codes of voyeurism and the male gaze are disrupted. However, as Lizzie Thynne (2009), who has explored Cahun's work and life in a series of publications and in her film *Playing a Part* (2005) screened at the 2011 Lesbian Lives Conference points out, when the image of Cahun is positioned next to the corresponding portrait of Moore in front of the mirror, the symmetry of the photographs emerges and we see that Cahun's gaze in the mirror reflection falls on her lover. So fully embracing the mirror trope, playfully exploring what it enables in terms of the erotic gaze, the lovers come together in the dimension of the reflection; the mirror world that is their own: as Thynne (2009: 191) observes, it produces a 'circle of ...lovers' looks'. Latimer's (2005) point that Cahun and Moore collaborated on the production of these double portraits positions the lover as the holder of the camera in each of the images, which further emphasizes the notion of a closed circuit of looks. She goes on to note: 'Viewed as pendants, these photographs picture the subject and object (of representation, of desire) as interchangeable, albeit not identical, entities. What we have here is not Narcissus and his/her reflection but "Narcissus and Narcissus"' (2005: 94) which mobilizes the desiring gaze. From her writings it is clear that Cahun conceptualized narcissism as a political tool. Using the term 'absolute Narcissism' (see Latimer 2010), which carries connotations of radical activism, she implies that narcissism is an act

of resistance that when radically performed subverts the previous derogatory usages of the term by the medical and psychoanalytical establishment but also in wider discourses of social control. In *Aveux non avenues* (1930) Cahun describes 'absolute Narcissism' as a form of revolt, a 'Non-cooperation with God. Passive resistance' which is a challenge to authority yet at the same time a form of resistance that implies withdrawal and exclusion as 'strategies' (cited in Latimer 2010: 2), not dissimilar from how the figure of the lesbian doubles embraces unintelligibility or the antisocial.

### **Narcissi**

The suggestion put forward here is to open up for the possibility of engaging with the trope of the lesbian doubles as a radical form of narcissism when read as positioned on a continuum that takes in mainstream popular culture, queer subcultures and feminist art. Exploring a small selection of works that all problematize the notion of the twinned couple as at once erotic and uncanny, this section draws out how investigations of the self and challenges to the economy of the 'male gaze' in art can work to prompt a rethinking of the unpopular culture representations.

### **[insert image 1: The Two Annas landscape]**

Natalie Papamichael, *The Two Annas* (after Anna Gaskell), 2008, Oil on wood panel, 37 x 45cm. Courtesy of the Artist.

In relation to the discourse of the doubles 'The Two Annas' (2008) by British artist Natalie Papamichael brings together both formal qualities and subject matter in a statement about duplication. The painting in which we see two women lying very close to each other on the grass is a copy of Anna Gaskell's 'Untitled #8' from her series of photographs 'Wonder' (1996), re-imagining episodes from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). The title 'The Two Annas' underlines the sameness of the bodies depicted and suggests they could be the same subject visualised as split in two or simply two subjects named the same. The women are near indistinguishable, although in Gaskell's close up photograph their individual differences are just noticeable. The particular style of dress, the blue pinafores worn over buttermilk coloured dresses, works to emphasise their sameness. They may be twins, lovers or otherwise tied to each other through strong resemblance. Again the over sameness of the bodies is both titillating and disturbing. The formal positioning of the bodies is perplexing and gives the image an eerie stillness and a ritualistic atmosphere, which combined with the awkwardly angled perspective produce an unsettling feeling. There appears to be an exchange of affect between the women although its meaning is not clear. The voyeurism implied in the viewer's positioning, as looking from behind/above, is underlined by the fact that the women have their eyes closed. This image of the women not looking but touching is powerful in that it amplifies the circularity and 'logic of seriality'<sup>6</sup> (Mitchell, 2003) of the popular culture lesbian *doppelgangers* discussed above in that they constitute each other's entire world of reference. The women fill the image completely leaving no room for

anything else to exist in their insular world. The only 'outside' is the grass, which links intertextually to the opening scene of David Lynch film, *Blue Velvet* (1986) where the perfect suburban white picket-fenced world is disrupted by the return of its real, a threat visualized by the camera zooming in on the perfect lawn to reveal its underworld of battling insects. The queerness of this image also lies in its static condition that only generates circularity without progression, something that Barbara Creed (1995:100) has pointed out perhaps is one of the most provocative aspects of the lesbian couple figured as doubles, as it articulates the banal and antisocial in sexuality.

'The Two Annas' challenges the tradition of portraiture in a number of ways. One notable departure is the doubling of the subject, which Perry and Leszkowicz (2012) argue 'unsettles our idea of a portrait subject as individual'. In addition it dwells on the practice of copying in itself. Papamichael (2012) describes her interest in the status of copying within the art world. Copying is at once well integrated in the male tradition of academic training as a painter, yet looked down upon as a principally female preoccupation, implying the female artist's inability to reach the genius status of the male artist. In her work Papamichael wants to challenge these derogatory notions of the copy particularly as they manifest in relation to discourses of gender and at the same time insert herself at the heart of the male domain of the academic training by closely following its age-old tradition of copying great pieces of art. Copying an artwork constitutes one of the most intimate relationships you can have with it and Papamichael's choice of a contemporary female artist to copy

is significant here as a mode of feminist canonisation. The positioning of a photograph as the 'original' also challenges established aesthetic value systems. The status of the copy is disturbing also to the artist who describes at one point marking the finished painting with a pink mark across one of the women's arm as to make it less perfect, but also imagining cutting off the copying hand. Nevertheless, having previously done a performance of Frida Kahlo's *The Two Fridas* (1939) she was drawn to the idea of performance in painting. With the 'Two Annas' then there is both the performance of the women in the image – performing Alice – and herself performing the photograph through painting it.

Spending nine months meticulously attending to detail in her copying of the photograph Papamichel describes her relationship with the image as it evolved as 'obsessive' and 'competitive' noting emotions of 'sibling rivalry' towards Gaskell. The two sleeping women in the photograph came to represent for her 'the passive females that you see so much in art history' which created a contrast to her own *active* practice of painting them.

However, she also notes their passivity as 'threatening' rather than 'alluring'.

In Gaskell's series of photographs from 1996 a set of twin girls enact different scenes that have strong references to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) but visually more directly relate to its popular culture rendition in the form of Walt Disney's 1951 film *Alice in Wonderland*, particularly noticeable in the play on Alice's dress – the blue dress and white pinafore she wears in Disney's animation and in the Technicolor reference evoked by the use of similarly vivid colours. The series is a feminist re-

enactment of Carroll's Alice that centres on sexuality, fantasy and adolescence. Gaskell's photographs overtly queries the myths and formulaic perspectives, lodged in both classical and popular culture narratives and visual culture, through which we approach girlhood and female sexuality. However, the women in Gaskell's photographs are too old to make a believable Alice and like in Lansley and Brendon's work some of the strangeness of these images origins from the incongruity between bodies, dress and narrative.

British artists Jo Lansley and Helen Bendon's 'The Familiar One' (1997) offers another example from contemporary women artists whose video and photographic work features twinned protagonists. Their work has been described as 'alternately rais[ing] and defus[ing] an atmosphere of perversity and menace, subverting comforting banality with a chilling understatement' (Briers, 2001: 37). In their photograph 'The Familiar One' two identically dressed women ambiguously hold on to each other in a way that looks both violent and intimate; somewhere between an embrace and restraining grip. Their relation is like 'The Two Annas' open to interpretation – it has something of an 'air of sibling complicity' which is how critic David Briers (2001: 38) describes the artists' working relationship but the image also has a movement or energy that suggests sex. The claustrophobic atmosphere of the image that resonates in the women's over-proximity is further emphasised by the tight fit of their dresses making the bodies appear awkward and stifled. The erotization of likeness and repetition in the radically narcissistic libidinal economy points to a foreboding fracture between the social and sexual bond

as the sexual drive towards sameness and proximity is also what brought to its 'fulfilment' brings about the annihilation of the self.

The ill-fitting clothes also draw attention to the materiality of the bodies, as we see the fabric stretched over the shoulder and arm. The dresses and opaque tights clearly reference girls' school uniforms, echoing a stock lesbian character in popular culture, but the size of the women, and the signs of age on their hands challenge this fantasy.

The juxtaposition of their full-grown bodies and the notion of adolescence also creates a friction between the notion of a former self and the now. There is an ambiguity about who 'the familiar one' of the title is, if it is the woman lying next to the other, implying a sexual knowledge of her, or whether the familiar one is a discarded version of the self or as de Lauretis (2011: 254) suggests, 'sexuality as something more than sex, as symptom, compulsion, aggression'. The connection between the double motif and narcissism, understood as a condition of early psychological development, leads to a notion of the double as a ghost of the past and something that harks back to a previous state of being. The double has therefore, as Royle notes, a *déjà vu* quality (2003: 182-3).

In this image, because it connotes a sense of 'dressing up' there is also a clear notion of *performed* sameness, which is something that is also central to one of the love scenes in *Mulholland Drive* where Rita, wearing a blond wig, is dressed up as girlfriend Betty before she is invited to join her in bed. Their erotic exchange involves playing with the sign of sameness, the wig, which is



rendered both camped up cliché and fetish onto which the fantasy of sameness can be displaced.

In 'The Familiar One' the women's heads are only partly visible, drawing attention to a familiarity that is about physical intimacy rather than the recognition of a face, which is similar to Monika Larsen Dennis and Maria Friberg's public installation 'Driven' (1998), a looped video which features two suited bodies (framed so that their heads are not in view) in a perpetual paired movement that has both the romance and erotic charge of a dance and the aggressiveness of a tussle.<sup>1</sup> The notion of erotic 'drive' is evoked in the title and the bodies' express both desire for each other and compulsion in their repeated movement. In this piece the bodies are more fluidly gendered, the focus on soft hips and hands is contrasted with the grey suits, which mark the performance of masculinity. Both these works emphasise duality and a refusal of the distinction between pleasure and invasion. They display an 'eternal pendulum between trust and suspicion, affection and aggression' (MoMaPS1, 2001) but also distinctly reference the trope of the narcissistic lesbian *doppelgangers*. 'The Familiar One' in particular mocks the clichéd titillation of the tabooed sexualisation of the school uniform in popular culture at the same time as it presents a troubled yet extremely close relationship between the women – which hints at an uncanny over-familiarity or disintegration of their subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.mariafriberg.com/workv\\_driven.html](http://www.mariafriberg.com/workv_driven.html) and <http://www.monikalarsendennis.com/art/videos/driven.html>

**[insert image 2 Narcissi I portrait]**

Sadie Lee, *Narcissi I*, 1993, Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.

In contrast to the sexual innocence subverted but still present in Lansley and Bendon's 'The Familiar One', British artist Sadie Lee's paintings 'Narcissi I' and 'Narcissi II' (1993) have no ambiguity about the sexual relation of the women depicted. As she points out, the women in the image are not apologetic: 'these women have done it' and they exude defiance (Lee 2012). Their bodies are toned and strong and their facial expressions solemn and private.

Lee (2012) describes her work as 'very autobiographical': 'I'm painting the people around me but nevertheless in a slightly contrived way but also referencing historical images and taking references from high end low culture.' Her portraits document the lives of people in the queer community in a style that captures the pleasure of performance. She often produces large-scale paintings and though the portraits are highly detailed they also often have a theatrical energy to them. The two portraits 'Narcissi I' and 'Narcissi II' (1993) are double self portraits of Lee and her partner at the time, in bed, produced during the time of their relationship.

Painted 'to bring out differences as much as ... similarities' (Lee 2012) these images speak more directly about lesbian sexuality. They explore desire constructed through the notion of sameness in lesbian culture and as performed by the couple in real life. For Lee it was important that the image wasn't read as a metaphor for the split subject rather than a portrait of an

erotically involved couple and to achieve this, yet retaining the notion of close similarity, she painted herself eye closed and her partner eyes open. 'It disturbs any reading where you might think it's the same person', she says (Lee 2012). Equally the subjects are clearly gendered female; we see their breast, the eyelashes with mascara and the background of lavender coloured voluptuous folded cloth further feminizes the image. In this sense the portraits are defiant in their representation of lesbian women and holds in delicate tension some of the gender performances of the butch. As Lee says in the interview, she is 'very aware of the gaze' in her work, but her images are not about refusing pleasure in this respect.

Both 'Narcissi I' and 'II' are painted on a round canvas, the circular shape working in concurrence with the subject matter to emphasise the repetition within the painting. This is most pronounced in 'Narcissi II' in which the women's heads are positioned in a yin/yang composition, facing each other. Looking back in her sketchbook from the time Lee notes how she worked at this composition at a very early stage in the process and cites as an inspiration Gluck's 1937 'Medallion' (also known as 'YouWe') a double portrait of the artist and her lover Nesta Obermer where their heads, depicted in profile, are fused (Souhami, 2001). The arrangement of the heads and arms in 'Narcissi II' is similarly contrived and the pose references more directly the Narcissus myth than 'Narcissi I', whilst the very symmetric pattern renders it a decorative piece in the way ornamental repetition and balance is aesthetically pleasing to look at. In 'Narcissi I', the likeness of their bodies is emphasised

by their semi-mirroring pose, arms pushing up against each other with visible pressure on the flesh in a sensory exchange.

Immersed in the aesthetics of the quotidian, American artist Kellie Connell's series of digital photomontages, 'Double Life' (2002-2010), features scenes of intimate moments between women who are uncannily similar. The effect is achieved by using the same model photographed in different positions and then digitally superimposing the images to create a seamless surface.

Drawing on a strong realistic aesthetic this technique produces a "documentary" image of a couple' but one where 'the original interaction never happened' (Bey, 2011). There is a resemblance here to Anna Gaskell's narrative photography in that each image is carefully staged, but these images retain a strong resemblance to the direct observational mode of documentary. The use of the double hints at the artificiality of the images but does not fully reveal them as montages or that the scenes depicted were staged only to be photographed. Similar to Lee's 'Narcissi I', several of Connell's images depict a post-coital moment or the women intimately positioned in relation to each other as in 'Head to Head' that mirrors the formal composition of 'Narcissi II', but there are also other much more mundane scenes of the fictional couple playing pool ('Poolshark'), pegging out the washing ('Clothesline') or having a row ('Kitchen Tension'). These images have more of an affiliation to a documentary tradition than to the stylised trope of the *doppelgänger* that we see in *Black Swan* or in the work by Lee and Lansley and Bendon. But their mundane and domestic setting nevertheless brings out a subtle haunting feeling of something at once highly familiar yet

strange being present in the home, in the bed. Digital montage in itself is quite banal but the banal is also the realm of the uncanny. An interesting aspect of Connell's work is how it captures the couple's mirroring of each other in the 'natural' body language and the small gestures like the positioning of hands in 'Giggle' signalling a fusion of their personal expression, but the notion of eroticised sameness or narcissism comes through stronger in compositions with an exchange of looks that also references indirectly a mirroring surface – the bath water in 'Bubble Bath' or the window in the background in 'Fresh Air'. The imaginings of eroticised sameness in popular culture and contemporary art speak of cultural anxieties around a fundamental disturbance of heteroreality – as founded on the paradigm of difference – that the figure of the lesbian *doppelgangers* signifies. The narcissism at the heart of such often very clichéd representations can, as discussed here, be radicalised in modes of resistance, as for example in feminist art and by disregarding the distinct categories of straight/ queer, male / female, mainstream / subculture cultural spheres the trope can be enjoyed as an expression of indifference to difference as a manifestly lesbian paradigm. By embracing its assumed connection to the death drive the figure of the narcissistic doubles provides a possible position from which to counter a heterosexist social order, if not as a political programme. However, the figure of the lesbian lovers as doubles also evoke disturbing aspects of possession and threat of annihilation, showing sexuality as 'an unmanageable excess of affect' (deLauretis, 2011: 245) which undercuts the utopian myth of mutuality in lesbian lore and offers an alternative to discourses of progression and reproductive futurity.

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## **Films**

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*Mulholland Drive* (2001). Dir. D. Lynch, USA.

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*Persona* (1966). Dir. I. Bergman, Sweden.

*She Monkeys* [Apflickorna](2011). Dir. L. Ashan, Sweden.

*Single White Female* (1992). Dir. B. Schroeder, USA.

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<sup>1</sup> The reality television format gives full rein to an exploitation of our fascination with lesbian bodies performing sameness but also, because of the twin sister's genetic resemblance, ties in with current media debates on the origins of homosexuality another cultural anxiety that haunts. Twinship brings to the fore the 'nature versus nurture' debates not least on issues of sexuality. See: <http://www.mtv.ca/tvshows/doubleshot/about.jhtml>

For a recent example of a (biological) lesbian twin act from queer subculture see The Topp Twins comic and musical duo from New Zealand featured in *The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls* (Pooley 2009). <http://topptwins.com/>

<sup>2</sup> My discussion here draws mainly on Freud's final paper on narcissism; 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' (1914). However, Freud's ideas about narcissism first emerged some ten years earlier in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), and were important to his 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood' (1910) and *Totem and Taboo* (1913).

<sup>3</sup> Most exceptionally played out in Patrician Highsmith's thriller *Ripley's Game* where Tom Ripley murders the man he desires and whose identity he subsequently appropriates.

<sup>4</sup> See for example 'A Kiss in the Glass' by Antoine Magaud c. 1885, reproduced as postcard c. 1910 – thus putting it into circulation in popular culture, cited by Tirza True Latimer (2003: 135) as an example of a prevalent clichéd representation of narcissistic femininity.

<sup>5</sup> Cahun had throughout her career a longstanding engagement with the trope of the double and mirroring surfaces in her photography. In one image Cahun and Moore stage a reversed Narcissus by turning the subject's back to the camera and the pool of water in front of her, in which we see the reflection of her back (Image reproduced in Downie (ed.) 2006: 58) suggesting a rejection of the association of narcissism with women and queers. But as discussed here, in other images there is more of an involved engagement with narcissism.

<sup>6</sup> Juliet Mitchell (2003) proposes early gender formations are constituted through sibling relations and siblings' negotiations of sameness and difference, rather than through a parent and child relation (the structure of the Oedipus scenario) according to a 'logic of seriality'.