Film Review

Femmes fatales

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Sydney, 1952: the city is in the grip of a violent crime wave. The chosen weapon is not a handgun or razor blade, and the perpetrators of the killing spree are not crime lords or gangs of youths. Thallium, a poison commonly used to control Sydney’s massive rat infestation, is being employed to destroy human life; mainly by the city’s housewives. Recipe for Murder explores this bizarre episode in urban history to create a grippingly gothic tale of sex, madness and the return of the repressed. What was being repressed, and what was exposed by the series of murders? Female dissatisfaction that the bright, advertised images of 1950s domesticity did not correspond to the grim struggles of their daily lives.

This is the conclusion reached by the documentary, which at the outset poses the sensational question, ‘What is it about this city that turns women into cold-blooded killers?’ To answer, filmmaker Sonia Bible focuses on three of these notorious murderesses: Yvonne Fletcher, a ‘blonde seductress’ and mother of two who widowed herself twice using Thall-rat; Caroline Grills, a 64-year-old grandmother who poisoned eleven relatives, killing four; and Veronica Monty, a 45-year-old divorcée who attempted to murder her famous footballer son-in-law and lover, Balmain player Bobby Lulham. In suspenseful fashion, these events are followed chronologically using archival footage of urban life, newspaper stills and silent re-enactments that establish mood without detracting from the voice-over commentary. Context and analysis are provided by interviews with historians Joy Damousi and Noel Sanders, police museum curator Nerida Campbell, crime writer Peter Doyle and others familiar with the cases.
The production was inspired by Campbell’s *Femme Fatale* exhibition, but the thallium poisonings have also been written about by Clair Scrine in a 2002 article for *Limina*, which, like the documentary, examines the feminine coding of the crimes. Damousi points out that poison, stereotypically a woman's weapon, fits the reputation of female murderers for underhanded deviousness rather than outright violence. Although the documentary reminds us that thallium was in some instances employed by men, it was its wide use by women that captured public fascination at the time. In the press and on the stand, they were painted as archetypes of female evil: Fletcher became the callous strumpet; Grills embodied the maternal instinct corrupted; and Monty was pilloried as the sexually predatory older woman.

The motivation, means and opportunity for the murders were all inflected by the killers’ femininity. Contemporaries unsympathetically depicted Fletcher and Monty as being actuated by a sexual voraciousness that appeared to indicate women’s innate wickedness. The documentary treats the women more empathetically in its construction of gendered motivations for the crimes. Fletcher, it reveals, was a victim of domestic violence with few options of escape. Grills initially sought suburban respectability through economic independence, though her later behaviour indicated some form of mania. Monty seems to have struggled with suicidal impulses in the wake of her divorce and subsequent affair with Lulham.

Repeated close-ups of enticing food imagery underscore the insidious threat behind women using ordinary domestic tasks for lethal means. The natural and womanly had suddenly become dangerous, and the horror of the murders was compounded, as the judge at Fletcher’s trial announced, by the poison being ‘secretly administered in the family circle’. These murderesses were subverting, not disowning, their gender roles.

In this respect, strong comparisons could be drawn between the thallium murders and Ann-Louise Shapiro's work on a spate of attacks by women using vitriol, a household cleaning product, against their husbands and lovers in fin-de-siècle Paris. However, in concentrating on the killings as something specific to 1950s Sydney and the uncertainties that followed women’s brief period of liberation during the war, the documentary also acts as a study of post-war society. Topics covered include slum housing, the six o’clock swill, the popularity of ‘nerve disorder’ diagnoses and the role played by the media in fomenting public panic and inspiring copy-cat killings.
Recipe for Murder’s imputation that the thallium murders were largely the result of post-war gender tensions is a compelling, though not entirely satisfactory, explanation for why eighteen people were killed and a further 102 poisoned in New South Wales between March 1952 and November 1953. The decisive end brought to the crime wave by the banning of thallium (already restricted or outlawed in most other states) points to a more prosaic contributing factor. Nevertheless, the documentary demonstrates that mixing an easily available poison with simmering social anxieties makes for a deadly combination – as well as highly engaging viewing.