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The fall of the pink curtain

Alliances between nationalists and queers in post-Yugoslavian cinema

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CHAPTER 3: WHO'S QUEER HERE: HOMOSEXUAL COHABITATION IN POST-WAR CROATIA

They lick each other. ... Now I know why their families abandoned them. That's why that little whore refused my Daniel. These whores need to be taught a lesson!

Fine Dead Girls

In this chapter I analyze the Croatian film *Fine Dead Girls*, directed by Dalibor Matanić in 2002. It is the first – and currently the only – mainstream Croatian film that focuses on the lives of lesbian characters. Because of this, it is ripe for analysis as an important example of lesbian-focused film whose mainstream production has helped it spread queer discourse to a wider population.

The film depicts a love story between a lesbian couple, Iva (Olga Pakalović) and Mare (Nina Viočić), who move into a new apartment in a building with an apparently friendly landlady named Olga (Inge Appelt). She gives the impression that her place is a quiet and safe environment. Besides Olga, her cowardly husband Blaž (Ivica Vidović) and conservative son Daniel (Krešimir Mikić), there are also other tenants: a sex worker Lidija who receives her clients in her room, a doctor who performs illegal abortions, his mentally disabled son, an old man who hides the body of his recently-deceased wife, in order to continue to collect her pension, and finally a housewife who is constantly abused by her husband – a violent nationalist war veteran who plays loud music late at night.

The couple choose to remain closeted and they are perceived as two friends. They do not actively disguise their identities like in *Go West*, nor have they publicly revealed their sexual orientation. Soon the couple realize that the building is under continuous surveillance by Olga, who polices the building meticulously. This eventually leads to abuse and violence once Olga discovers the couple's secret. After their forced coming out, they are violently pushed back into the closet

which results in Iva being raped and Mare being killed while fighting for her partner. Then, Iva returns to her former boyfriend Dalibor, gets pregnant and bears a child.

The film contributes to the discourse about the political situation in post-war Croatia and displays a sort of micro-cosmos in its portrayal of homophobic responses to homosexuality. It shows these characters as others, living on the edge of normality. Their otherness is also visually underscored: the apartment building is located next to railway lines and a road which perpendicularly bisects the tracks – these trajectories can be viewed as lines of normality and abnormality. The film is set up in such a way that in one rail direction people are seen as being normal and in the other direction as being deviant. The hierarchy that exists in the building places the lesbian couple at the bottom of the pecking order and are persecuted by all the other tenants. Yet, the couple's cohabitation with the other inhabitants and the forming of strange alliances indeed propose ways to escape the strict heteronormative views portrayed in the film.

First, I analyze a moment during which Olga's husband Blaž finally acknowledges that his wife's homophobic actions have gone too far. When Mare is killed, he decides to help Iva escape the building. To analyze the political potential of the alliances between Blaž and the couple, I first investigate the local heteronormative perspective of post-war Croatian society to observe how compulsory heterosexuality/heteronormativity and homophobic violence contributes to the creation of a transparent closet. I am also interested in the representation of certain types of violence as a form of denunciation of homophobia. I aim to explore the kinds of violence perpetrated and how the film denounces them. The film critiques a supposedly virtuous discourse of nationalism and religious purity. Since *Fine Dead Girls* is the first mainstream film that focuses on lesbian characters, it is itself a sort of coming out. For the first time, a lesbian theme is introduced to Croatian society through a film's narrative. Therefore, to understand local realities and homophobia in the region, it is important to analyze how Croatian society received it and what discourses the film deployed.

Secondly, I analyze specific scenes to illuminate the activist tactics deployed in the narrative. Several alliances involve compromises and suggest that radical heteronormative discourses are also questioned from within. I demonstrate how the lesbian couple challenges masculinities within the male-dominated Croatian society. Asking “Who is actually queer here?” enables me to focus on the distinction between open lesbian sexuality within private spaces and the violence manifested through rape, murder, and kidnapping that the couple undergoes when their sexuality becomes public.

Heteronormativity and Homophobic Violence

The alliances between heterosexual males and lesbians in post-war Croatian society are determined by a high level of heteronormativity, a concept that travels easily between West and East. As early as 1980, Adrienne Rich suggested that heterosexuality needs to be recognized as a political institution (1980: 637) and her argument is still heard in Croatia today. She argues that the government – through its laws, legislation, informal social and cultural regulations – enforces compulsory heterosexuality by creating powerful instruments to control relationships between the sexes. This allows men to enforce heterosexuality on women (640), who thus become their sexual objects. As a result, women are constructed as physically, economically, and emotionally dependent on men. Rich further argues that the existence of lesbianism represents an act of resistance and a rejection of this compulsory way of life; which explains why it is perceived as an attack on men’s rights to access women (649). At the same time lesbians are trapped in a closet (675), since the basic social unit is constituted as a heterosexual family. They must live a double life, reside in a gay ghetto, or address the consequences of coming out.

I am not saying that Croatia is backwards or left behind but Rich’s vocabulary is still relevant today and they are some of the Western concepts that translate to the region. More recently, Sara Ahmed has argued that heterosexual societies operate as “straightening device[s],” where all forms of queer desire are considered deviations (2006: 107). She warns us that heterosexuality as a

compulsory orientation not only demands a reproduction of heterosexuality but is perceived as a mechanism for the reproduction of culture with a requirement that we bring home “the same race” (127). In the case of *Fine Dead Girls*, however, ethnicity and religion are re-produced. This is meant to be a revelation, of a hidden secret, a dynamic or a logic that we no longer see.

While compulsory heterosexuality has been mostly rejected in the West at the federal level, Eastern queer communities still have a long way to go. To be clear, the comparison here is not meant to suggest that the East is following a path similar to that of the West. Today, Western countries pride themselves on having opened gender borders and on granting equal rights to homosexuals, a stance that challenges compulsory heterosexuality by deinstitutionalization. Western Europe currently takes pride in the loosening of heteronormativity and de-institutionalizing normative heterosexuality; it appropriates a narrative of progress that implicitly accuses the East of being unadvanced. A careful examination of what has happened in former Yugoslavia reveals a cautionary tale because progress and backlashes unfortunately go together; there was even a time when Croatia was more advanced than the so-called West. Until 2013, the Croatian constitution was actually more liberal than that of the United States for example, in terms of homosexual marriage because it did not explicitly mention that a legal union could only take place between a man and a woman. The referendum of 2013 changed the situation. As I explained in the first chapter, nowadays, only a man and a woman may marry.

Heteronormativity often goes hand in hand with homophobic violence, both in the West and the East. Rich demonstrated that at the end of the last century, heterosexuality needed to be imposed, managed, organized, imposed by propaganda, or maintained by force (644). According to the Furies Collective, the heterosexual norm is not really a sexual norm at all, but a powerful instrument in the perpetuation of the power relationship between the sexes (Seidman 2009: 20). Steven Seidman points out that compulsory heterosexuality not only enforces the normative status of heterosexuality, but also enforces a normative order within heterosexuality and establishes a standard of so-called normal heterosexuality (23). Along these lines, Tanja Renner also points out

that heteronormativity can only be established with repression and violence (2005: 10). She asks why heteronormativity – if it really were so normal and natural – would need such an enormous amount of violence to reproduce itself, and why it needs to work on itself to ensure its constant expression and acknowledgment.

The Death of Lesbian Desire

In *Fine Dead Girls*, violence takes the form of intense surveillance, scrutiny, and control once it becomes clear that Mare and Iva are a lesbian couple. Shortly after they settle into their new residence, it is revealed to the viewer that landlady Olga observes her tenants by spying on them through a keyhole and then using the information to control their lives. She does not require sophisticated surveillance technology to create an environment rife with secrets and where privacy does not exist. To make matters worse, viewers are forced to occupy the same focal position as the landlady when the camera turns us into voyeurs; we are forced to either follow the surveillance or stop watching the film.

In one scene, Iva and Mare are making love in their bedroom and Olga decides to spy on them. The two lovers are kissing by the window and then move to the private space of the bed. During this scene, the camera provides close-up shots focused on specific parts of their bodies; they are depicted touching and kissing in sensual and erotic ways. The private space of their bedroom becomes de-privatized by observers: Olga and the viewer, who sees the scene from her perspective. This scene is cross-edited with Olga's preparations to surveil them: uplifting music plays in the background as she dresses and makes up her face. Because this scene is cross-edited with shots of Olga, Iva and Mare's love making appears interrupted. Thus, the viewer is prepared for an interruption that takes place within the narrative. Olga, Iva, and Mare are formed into a triangular threesome that will become violent. Olga rings their doorbell and knocks on the door but does not get any response. Undeterred, and clearly oblivious to the fact that the material border (the door) is

also a legal and symbolic border between private and public spheres. Viewers see her reaching for a spare key. *Fine Dead Girls* teaches us that one can be interrupted anywhere and anytime.

Before she enters their room, the camera travels upwards and the vantage point changes: we are now viewing a scene from above; the camera captures the women's naked bodies. This bird's eye view, producing a distancing effect, de-solidarizes itself from Olga's spying position; it makes the viewer aware that there is at least one other possible viewpoint. Yet, when Olga enters the apartment the camera again adopts her point of view. Upon entering, orchestral music adds excitement to her discovery that Iva and Mare are making love. The director uses the kind of dramatic music reminiscent of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) to create a sense of foreboding future misfortune. Since the music seems to comment on the thrill of Olga's discovery, it can therefore be interpreted as mocking either Olga or the secret of the couple. For the viewer, this is a position of ironic ambivalence – to the extent that we are enlisted as involuntary voyeurs.

Soon after her discovery, Olga gossips to the other tenants which results in escalating violence and eventually leads to rape and murder. The first person to respond is Olga's son Daniel, who sends the women a phallic sex toy to remind them of the missing masculinity totem. Mare calls him an impotent imbecile with a mother complex. The following day, Daniel visits Iva and attempts to seduce her while pretending to seek help for a bogus skin laceration. Iva rejects his advances and the violence begins in earnest. When he pushes her towards the wall, the camera zooms-out and the angle changes to a shot from the corridor. Iva tries to protect herself, but since he is stronger, she is seriously wounded. The camera angle then shifts to provide a shot outside the window while we hear trains roaring past. This shift indicates how the violence in this building is hidden behind brick walls and nobody from the outside has access. The camera position denotes critique while avoiding the position of complicity adopted by the other tenants. The window can be seen as a border and offers a reflection of society outside.

On the one hand, as spectators observing a rape scene, we are complicit; our position, however, makes us feel helpless, unless we decide to flee the narrative and exit the theater. The

camera shift provides viewers with the possibility not to watch the act directly but pushes us to consider that even if we do not watch we are complicit through our silence – we have no way out. There is also another perpetrator in the room who occupies a viewing position: observing and not intervening, Olga stands at the door witnessing Daniel's assault.

When Iva suddenly opens her eyes, she looks directly at Olga. The camera moves to an extremely-low-angle shot that implies superior and inferior positioning. Olga seems to enjoy the violent spectacle unfolding before her eyes. Her attention to Iva makes her a sadistic participant in the rape. Viewers can infer this from Olga's comments after finding out that Iva and Mare are lesbians. She remarks that "these whores need to be taught a lesson" ["Marš, kurve, treba njih naučiti pameti"]. By witnessing and doing nothing to stop the rape, Olga is seen to assert her omnipotent power over the building and its inhabitants. She is in a position of authority and control; always spying on others and only selectively interacting with others to reinforce her police-like activities. Everything she sees turns into a form of pornography and viewers are placed in a powerless position.

When Mare comes home and finds out that Iva was raped, she immediately searches for Daniel. The camera begins to shake while dramatic instrumental music plays in the background. On her way – alongside the railway line – Mare breaks the windows of Daniel's shop as Olga is heard screaming: "What are you doing you fucking whore? Your girlfriend has finally enjoyed sex like a real woman!" ["Šta radiš, kurva? Tvoja prijateljica konačno je uživala kao prava žena"]. When Mare finds Daniel, they become embroiled in a physical fight. The scene takes place in a train's boxcar while the screeching of other passing trains is heard. Symbolically, they are fighting on the border between the spaces occupied by normality and deviance, in a no-man's-land where the norm is contested. When Mare kills Daniel by pushing him out of the boxcar and under a passing train, Olga screams, calling the other tenants to help her catch Mare.

From this point on, the action occurs quite quickly. The camera becomes erratic and chaotic; it cuts quickly from scene to scene while dramatic violin music arrives at a crescendo to underscore

the visual violence. While the tenants gather in Mare and Iva's apartment all the secrets are revealed: the nationalist finds out about his wife's abortion conducted by the doctor and Iva finds out that the necrophiliac's wife is dead. They all begin to yell and chase Mare; she is portrayed as a scapegoat for the hidden violence. In the next scene Mare lies dead on the staircase but we do not know who killed her. The chaotic atmosphere ends when the camera shifts to an exterior shot of the building. This time it jumps to the other side of the railway lines and we see the building in the background while the barriers close and the red lights flash their warning signal. This shot signals the violence taking place on the other side of the tracks – I would suggest also on the other side of the norm – which is framed by the beginning and ending moments of the film like a prologue and epilogue depicting a scene set in Dalibor's residence, Iva's future husband's home. It is how the film is framed; from the heterosexual perspective on the other side, the heterosexual world, to which Iva will ultimately escape. This is a discourse of violence distorted and turned inside out to blame Mare for involving the police, whom Olga manages to trick in order to protect herself from the lesbian couple and be seen as a victim.

After Mare's death, Iva goes back to her former boyfriend Dalibor, gets pregnant and bears a child. But even this return to heteronormativity and motherhood does not protect her against Olga's violence. Imagining that the baby could be Daniel's child, Olga kidnaps the child. She assumes the role of Daniel and asserts the parental rights of a biological father. When she calls the police and accuses Olga of kidnaping, Olga manages to convince the police that she is innocent by impersonating an old frail disabled woman. Usurping the place of vulnerability that the government is there to protect, she convinces the investigators that she is a victim. Although it is obvious to viewers that Olga is lying to the police, it is just as clear that the lesbian character will get neither help nor justice from the government.

It is useful to examine additional examples of how *Fine Dead Girls* critiques homophobic violence and lays the blame firmly at the doorsteps of nationalism and Catholicism. In the film nationalist and Catholic symbols are to be associated with violence. The nation-state and Catholic

religion – instead of opposing officially sanctioned violence – tolerate or even encourage it. When the film opens, viewers see a Croatian flag waving from a window of the building into which Iva and Mare will move. The flag owner, a war veteran, periodically discharges his gun while wearing a military uniform, he acts violently towards the other tenants, and repeatedly attacks and rapes his wife. Later the camera follows a group of young nationalist skinheads tying a Roma boy to the train tracks and leaving him there to be run over by a train. Religion is just as meaningless in this environment, which is underscored by images of the violent veteran regularly taking his neglected family to Sunday mass. An even stronger connection between religion and violence is present in the rape scene. Focusing on Daniel, the camera offers viewers a close-up of a crucifix necklace Daniel wears as he is raping her. It is not clear whether the film emphasizes Daniel's betrayal of his religion or accuses Catholicism of justifying the crime of rape.

On the other hand, one benevolent character is presented as having to break religious and governmental laws to accomplish virtuous work. The doctor helps his patients by performing abortions. In one scene, a group of Catholic nuns pay him a visit. They are there in the capacity of patients and we quickly understand that this is not an isolated incident but that they regularly call on him to perform abortions. He is thus breaking the law since they forbid abortion and at the same time he is complicit in the act of nuns breaking their celibacy vows. In the film, he is constructed as a helper who protects women from the dictates of religion and government.

Homophobic characters, instead, believe that sexual preference is a form of religious belief: lesbians are equated with infidels who must be converted. Lidija, the sex worker, receives money from Mare's religiously conservative father to seduce his daughter's girlfriend. A plan is constructed wherein Lidija will break up their relationship; and in so doing, make Mare straight again. Her father asks Lidija to do god's will and "help the sinner return to the right path" ["Pomažemo grešnici, da se vrati na pravi put"]. Iva soon discovers Lidija's plan; she confronts her, and the plan fails.

The plot also critiques the religious and nationalist framing of lesbianism as a contagious disease by suggesting that coincidences can be interpreted as God's intervention. When Lidija wants to return the money and offer sexual services to Mare's father, he decides to stay overnight while sounds of thunder strike in the background. At this point, the irksome neighbor begins performing boisterous nationalist songs; a scream is heard, and Mare's father is depicted as having died during coitus. Ironic and biting satirical allusions to hypothetical divine interventions implicitly critique narrow and conservative versions of governmental and religious discourses.

A Long-Running Societal Confrontation

The producers of *Fine Dead Girls* had difficulties obtaining funding for this first Croatian-produced lesbian-oriented film; especially because they firmly criticize homophobic violence. The film took six years to produce because the central focus on a lesbian narrative was "too shocking" for national television networks, the Ministry of Culture, and the HDZ, a conservative center right party (Simić 2012: 94). At that time, funding was impossible to find because of the subject matter. Things changed, however, in 2000 when, after ten years of being the leading party, the HDZ lost its lead position. Simić argues that this political turn had many advantages for filmmakers. For example, the ministry-lead film committee was replaced with a non-governmental commission. Politically speaking, the atmosphere became liberalized which freed directors from self-censorship and enabled them to make films containing political statements (2012: 95). The Ministry of Culture and national television networks indeed supported the film, even though it only received €450,000 euros, quite a small amount compared with what was allocated to other funded films which addressed less sensitive subject matters. Necessarily, the producers had to apply for additional private sector funding.

Political power relationships in Croatia are responsible for policy construction and social attitudes towards art production. I suggest that the topic of lesbianism, rather than the quality of the film, reflects the influence governmental authorities have on artistic production. *Fine Dead Girls*

was doubly problematic: it not only depicted lesbians but portrayed them in an empathic way. Yet, the film was warmly received by the public at home and abroad. The film won the Special Jury Award at the Sochi International Film Festival³² and Matanić was awarded the Young Jury Prize at Geneva's Cinéma tous Ecran festival, among other accolades. In Croatia, it received five Golden Arena awards from both the jury and audience at the Pula Film Festival, the oldest film festival in the region. Dating far back from the before the 1990s war, the Pula Film Festival offers an interesting perspective on the transformation of politics.³³ *Fine Dead Girls* was heralded as the best Croatian film second only to *Maršal* (*Marshal Tito* 1999), a “mildly provocative, populist political comedy dealing with the Croatian past and the present” (Simić 2012: 93). Some even claim that it is the most noteworthy film in the history of post-1991 Croatian cinema (Polimac 2002).

The warm reception is not, however, evidence that the general public's opinion suddenly became less homophobic; consequently, the actors felt that it was necessary to take certain precautions. In order not to be confused with their characters, the lead actresses chose to repeatedly respond that they were straight when asked by the media. I would argue that they internalized the public's homophobia and acted as though they were ashamed of playing lesbian characters. They certainly did not publicly defend their characters in the limelight of media scrutiny. In the behind-the-scenes video made to accompany the film, viewers see Nina Violić, who played the butch lesbian Mare, looking at a naked man on her computer screen. Later, she is shown pregnant, sitting on a sofa and leafing through a book while interpretive cues are superimposed. With a strange twist, the actress' and character's name appeared: “Nina Violić – Mare,” then “Roza” (presumably, the name of the baby) with an arrow pointing to her bulging belly. It seems that much effort was made

³² This is the largest national film festival in held in Russia. Established only in 2016 it aims to build cultural bridges between Russia and the UK; it symbolically takes place at the location where the 2014 Olympic Games were held. The festival's vision is to promote humanity and connections between ethnicities beyond international borders.

³³ The festival began in 1954. From 1961-1991 it was called the Festival of Yugoslav Feature Film, when it was cancelled due to the war. After the war, it continued under the name of Pula Film Festival and in 1995 it was renamed as the Croatian Film Festival to emphasize Croatian nationhood. In 2001, the festival began accepting international films and was renamed the Croatian and European Film Festival.

to shield the actress from any doubt about her sexuality. The naked man is a crude representation of Viočić's supposed sexual desire and the arrow visually links the pregnant woman to the male figure.

The film triggered quite different reactions from critics and queer activists. Croatian critic Nenad Polimac argues that “although *Fine Dead Girls* is not a typical gay film that auto-reflexively concerns itself with the hidden nuances of homosexual relations ... [it] succeeds precisely because of the realistic portrayal of the heroines' personal relationship” (Polimac 2002). On the other hand, Simić argues that Matanić directed a “sexist and patriarchal product that operates within the same repressive film tradition which represents lesbian (and female) characters as victims and establishes lesbian relationships as an impossibility” (Simić 2006c). She claims that the film is using a lesbian couple to criticize Croatian society and argues that the film shows lesbians only from a superficial perspective, while not focusing on the characters' sexuality and relationship; which a so-called real lesbian film would indeed do. Moreover, she criticizes the film for not creating a space for feminist resistance, and instead represents lesbianism as a choice and deviant medical condition that must be overcome (Simić 2010: 213). Yet, she admits that by focusing the narrative on a victimized woman who tells the story through a flashback, the director questions the position of women in society precisely to point out the accusations they face daily for not resisting patriarchal structures.

In a response to this critique, Matanić doubts the power of film to change homophobia. He remarks: “I would like to help all of society if I could, but I don't know how powerful art is to help at present since it is so marginalized. How is it possible to cleanse people, to galvanize them into action?” (Trajkov 2003). He is clearly aware that the film might not work the way he had intended, yet his film does add another perspective to the issue of lesbianism in Croatia.

Activist Tactics: Queering Normalization

This film presents the audience with a strong critique of homophobia and homophobic violence. Heterosexist authority is always the result of brute force and violence. Examples include that the heteronormative characters are guilty of surveillance, rape, homicide, and kidnapping. An implicit

alliance is created between the viewer and targets of homophobic attacks which is justified in the name of nationalism and religion. Despite their tragic fate, the lesbian couple is constructed as being content and emotionally fulfilled, certainly not as victims. The perpetrators on the other hand, are far from joyful. The couple is presented as self-contained, loving, and independent, even as they are persecuted by the heteronormative characters.

The film's affection for these characters is also indicated by the introduction of other queer relationships within the building which are useful to examine. As if to counterbalance the relentless violence of Olga and her son, the narrative suggests that other forms of connection between tenants are possible. These marginalized characters on the other side of normality – imposed by religion and nationalism – are invited to organize and search for alliances elsewhere. The relationship between Iva, Mare, and the other tenants is crucial to the plot, especially after it is discovered that they are a couple. The tenants are all victims of a system established during the transition period of post-war Croatia, a system which saw the revival of patriarchal and traditional values. They all cohabitate in a building that symbolizes and depicts their alienation from society-at-large and particularly the government's imposed social norm.

After Olga discovers Iva's and Mare's secret, she immediately spreads the information throughout the building. Matanić takes a journalistic approach to show the many responses of the other tenants. Olga tries to mobilize them against the couple, but they disappoint her. The tenants are definitely not in agreement with the landlady: the abused wife does not want to express her feelings at all, the sex worker has lesbian friends, the doctor suggests that they are too young to be condemned, the nationalist's ego is hurt but he is not hostile, the aging necrophiliac gossips, Olga's husband is completely benevolent, and Daniel remains speechless. These reactions reflect that only Olga's son is willing to form a homophobic pact with her and that the director is attempting to present their homophobic reactions as being stupid. Viewers are generally inclined to quickly ally themselves with the tenants' non-hostile reactions.

The film portrays a harmonious couple who does not interfere in other people's affairs, whereas the violence in the film originates from those who accuse them of violence. If anyone leads a balanced and fulfilling life here, it seems to be the supposedly minority couple whose life is apparently peaceful and quietly normative. The dangerous ones, the violent ones, are the ones who are afraid of the lesbian couple. Yet, the straight characters' crimes remain hidden or implicitly condoned, and thus remain unpunished. The film tries to establish a sort of hierarchy of possible normative and non-normative rules and then singles out lesbians. Whereas the normality of the lesbian couple is foregrounded, the quirkiness of the other characters is exacerbated as if to question the alignment between the norm and feelings of normality.

The important plot events finally reach a crescendo with Iva's escape to her previous heterosexual relationship. In this way, the violence is made unpalatable rather than justified. The film argues to condemn this sort of foolishness, although it is still tolerated in reality and public discourse: where lesbians should stay in the closet or, if they do come out, should be violently pushed back into the transparent closet. Criminals, however, are actually protected by nationalistic and religious forces, while lesbians are relegated to silent subjects and often slain.

The film also suggests the possibilities of alliances between the lesbian characters and other figures who are also pressured by the norm and especially by the narrow definition of masculinity. Marko Dumančić notes that "Matanić produces masculinities that are damaged beyond repair; the gendered system he presents is so thoroughly dislodged from its heterosexist axis that the impossibility of homosexual unions would hardly be sufficient to compensate for the masculine lack" (2012). He claims that both heterosexual men and lesbians contradict the stereotype of a society governed by a hetero-centric principle. Masculinity in the film is made synonymous with violence and death: Daniel rapes Iva and dies, and the nationalist veteran tells his wife that she must have an abortion if the child is not a boy. Even the doctor's role is reduced to performing abortions. As for Olga's husband, he is portrayed as a marionette controlled by his wife and being ashamed of his son who is incapable of his own initiative.

And yet, in *Fine Dead Girls*, a relationship forms between the lesbians and Olga's husband; it is a queer alliance that redraws the boundaries of what is understood as normal. Even though Blaž is controlled by his wife and cannot control his own son, he does manage to create a hidden bond with the couple on two occasions. His first act of resistance, after Olga cancels their lease, he secretly helps them find a new apartment. He does not openly defy her, and he is shown whispering when talking to Iva and Mare because he is afraid of being overheard by Olga. She ordered him to throw them out, but he only pretends to comply and instead offers them a solution. An even more important moment of misidentification with the norm occurs at the end of the film when Olga kidnaps Iva's child. At this point, Blaž seems to have finally reached a point of no return. The scene begins with him sitting in the kitchen. The camera slowly enters the room and there is silence as the viewer is slowly brought close to him. The camera then offers a close-up of his face. He is clearly concerned. In this scene, which is very slow and accompanied by lighthearted music and what sounds like water slowly dripping from the edge of a bucket, he finishes enjoying a cigarette and extinguishes it in a nearby ashtray. He then stands up and slowly walks up the stairs to the room where Olga plays with the child. The soothing music accompanies him as he confronts Olga, insisting that the child is not their grandson. The camera, which often depicts a view of Olga from a low angle, changes perspective while she shouts at her husband that he is responsible for Daniel's death. The camera shows Olga on the floor with her husband positioned above. He then kills her.

Like the other characters, he can only imagine secrets and hidden alliances. The film never suggests that he could have asserted himself earlier or was able to avoid the violence. Even this very last moment of action has to do with a child who was born to a now straight family. Blaž's intervention is a rather chaotic and individualized reaction which leans towards severe violence. This is a vendetta, a sort of lynching, and not justice.

This film criticizes Croatian society for its negative approach towards lesbians by: exposing homophobia with an excess of violence on the screen, condemning the police for not protecting lesbian victims, presenting the church as self-sabotaging, criticizing nationalists views, and

criticizing the connection between violence, nationalism, and religion. In an interview, Matanić suggests that the film is “an acerbic social criticism and compassion” (Trajkov 2003). The film is a coming-out narrative that criticizes nationalism and religion and proposes a queer alliance. Although it is the first film to focus on lesbians in Croatian mainstream cinema, the lesbian community was never directly involved in its production. The film’s title – *Fine Dead Girls* – suggests self-contradictory tensions within the story. This is an ironic allusion to the commonplace homophobic phrase that “the only good gay person, is a dead gay person” yet it goes further. Some viewers may indeed interpret the murder of Mare as a pessimistic *no-way-out* scenario, expect perhaps that the audience is asked to care about her death.