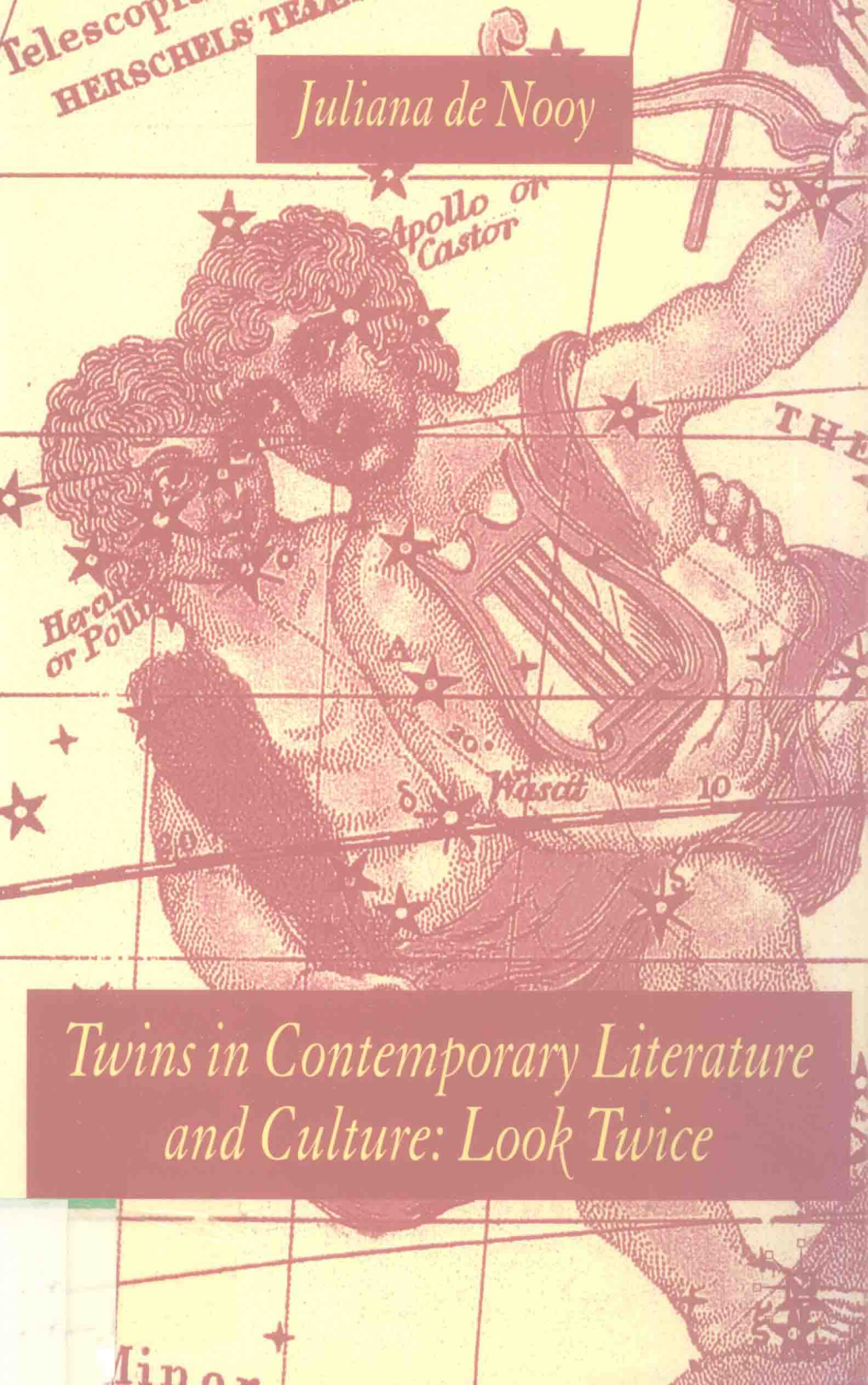


Telescope  
HERSCHEL'S TELESCOPE

*Juliana de Nooy*



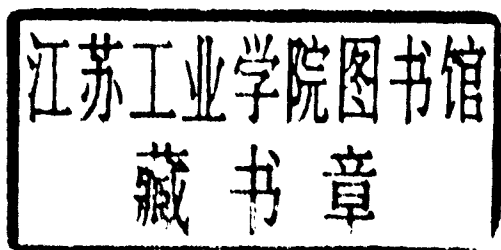
*Twins in Contemporary Literature  
and Culture: Look Twice*

Minor

# Twins in Contemporary Literature and Culture

Look Twice

Juliana de Nooy  
*University of Queensland*



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On our own, you wouldn't look at us twice. But, put us together...

ANGELA CARTER, *Wise Children*

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# Introduction

My children are twins, and acquaintances often imagine that this book was prompted by their arrival. Far from it: the book was conceived well before they were, and early versions of some chapters had already appeared as conference papers before my twins made an appearance with two banana-shaped patches on the pregnancy scan. Rather their arrival proves the dangers of becoming too absorbed in a research project: it really does colonise your life. As my colleague Peter Cowley exclaimed at the news: 'Just as well you weren't studying stories of abduction by aliens...'

In fact the seeds of the book were sown in the early 1980s, in work for an honours dissertation, when I struggled to find non-dialectical narratives about same-sex couples, that is, stories in which the pair was not largely defined by an opposition between characters. The search led me to Michel Tournier's novel *Gemini*, and to the suspicion that narrative punishment was meted out to characters that chose a partner too like themselves. Other projects – academic and personal – intervened, and it wasn't until the mid-1990s that I returned to a version of this question, with a rather different approach. Its pursuit evolved into what is now Chapter 2, on surviving sameness.

In the course of my hunt for stories of resemblance, I collected a corpus of contemporary tales of twins and doubles and was astounded by the vast number and variety of films, novels, newspaper articles and documentaries about twins, and by the fact that certain stories were being told over and over again. Why, I asked myself, are there such clusters of texts that tell of the stranglehold of brotherly love, of the evil twin who steals her sister's lover, of the homicidal mutant twin, of the reunion of twins separated at birth, of twins divided by warring nations, of confusion between lookalike twins? Why do these stories

need to be retold now and how they are being transformed in the telling? What do our narrative uses of twins reveal about contemporary culture?

*Twins in Contemporary Literature and Culture* addresses these questions. Clearly, twins are being used to work through some important preoccupations, some quite specific to late twentieth-century culture. In particular, some of the most insistent retelling of twin tales today uses twins to explore questions of gender and sexuality. Other sets of stories relate to new ways of thinking about national and personal identity. I make no claim to exhausting the cultural uses made of twins (there is no limit to the ways in which twins can be harnessed by the imagination!), preferring to concentrate on some particularly revealing storytelling habits.

Chapter 1 outlines the scope of the study and offers a theoretical framework for studying both the diversity and repetition of twin tales. Rejecting the premise that there is a single, underlying meaning to the appearance of twins in our storytelling, it proposes an analysis in terms of particular conjunctions of gender and genre rather than treating twins as a unified thematic. Twins are used for different purposes in different narrative genres. While they are equally available to provide intrigue in horror, comedy, crime and romance, they tend not to fulfil the same function in each case. They do not provide a single key to contemporary culture but multiple entry points. The chapter also situates the book in relation to various existing studies of twins and doubles, challenging critical work that suggests that twentieth-century narratives represent the decline into triviality of a great Romantic theme. On the contrary, the examples studied throughout the book attest to innovation and vitality in the refashioning of twin tales for new audiences.

Chapters 2 to 7 each offer a reading of a particular concentration of twin tales, before analysing in detail a story that attempts to shift a repeated pattern. Chapter 2 ('Twins and the Couple') explores the difficulty of surviving sameness in twin narratives, for outside comic genres, stories of twins and doubles are short on survivors. This is not only the case in tales of deadly rivalry between good and evil twins, but also in stories of twins as soul-mates, partners in life, whose relationship of resemblance dooms them to sink into stagnation and perish. Tales of the death of soul-mate twins have been pervasive in Western imaginative discourses throughout the last century, crossing cultures and genres, and harking back to the myth of Narcissus and its use by Freud to describe a pathological state. Clearly they reflect a

moral imperative regarding our choice of partners, yet there are good reasons for wanting to tell other, less lethal stories about couples defined by their resemblance. In a reading of three novels relating the life of male twins who form a couple – Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala* (1966), Michel Tournier's *Les Météores* (1975), and Bruce Chatwin's *On the Black Hill* (1982) – this chapter investigates the possibility of telling such stories differently. The twins in each case form a same-sex couple who must negotiate the pitfalls of narcissism. The unfolding of these narratives resonates with the development of contemporary discourses of gay identity, and points to a rethinking of what constitutes a viable relationship. If coupledness has traditionally been understood as a synthesis of differences into oneness, the novels allow us to glimpse its reconception as a relation in which sameness and difference are mutually entailing.

Chapter 3 ('Twins and Sexual Rivalry') turns to female twins, rare in literary history but abundant in twentieth-century popular film, especially in the 1940s and 1990s. The overwhelming majority of these films are thrillers involving deadly rivalry over a man between good and evil identical twin sisters. Moreover, these sisters are always split along the same predictable line – a version of the virgin/whore dichotomy. What is it about this story that it still needs to be told so frequently? How has it been reworked in the wake of the sexual revolution and feminism to appeal to a contemporary audience? And why might we want to tell sister stories differently? Here it is revealing to study a film that transposes gender in the tale of sexual rivalry. Like so many twin sister films, Tim Hunter's *Lies of the Twins* (1991) is a story about jealousy between twins over a love interest, but in this highly unusual case the virtuous fiancé and sex-driven homebreaker are twin brothers. Viewing *Lies of the Twins* as a role reversal exposes the cultural myths underlying female twin films and suggests strategies for rethinking the dichotomy that continues to pervade them. Twins may be commonly employed in film to incarnate the binary oppositions that dominate our thinking, but this chapter shows that they can also be used to question them.

If twin sister thrillers invariably work through fantasies of female sexuality, post-1980 horror films featuring male conjoined twins also impose a compulsory figure. Chapter 4 ('Twins and the "Crisis of Masculinity"') takes a close look at films by Cronenberg, Romero and Henenlotter together with a parody of the corpus in *The X-Files* to demonstrate the systematic representation of this twin relation as maternal. At a time of destabilisation of traditional masculine

identities, conjoined twins in the horror genre provide an ideal opportunity to feminise the male body. Joined and disjoined, the brothers' bodies are displayed as umbilically linked, and monstrosly so. One bond dating from the womb – twinship – is used to substitute for another – the mother-child dyad – in a surprisingly consistent way. This is but a recent pattern among twin films, and yet its strength is evident when we find the theme of maternity surfacing in conjoined twin films in genres other than horror. The Polish brothers' *Twin Falls Idaho* (1999, 'a different kind of love story') is a case in point: unable simply to ignore this convention, it is obliged continually to deflect it. The examples point to a highly specific cultural use of twins at the close of the twentieth century.

The focus on gender continues in Chapter 5 ('Twins and the "Gay Gene" Debate'), which examines two very different uses of twins to talk about sexual identity: twin studies research on homosexuality and queer comic fiction in the shape of Robert Rodi's *Drag Queen* (1995), a gay parody of long-lost twin tales. While the former uses twins to engage in the nature/nurture debate over homosexuality (revitalised by media interest in the 'gay gene' hypothesis), the latter rewrites the very terms of this debate. *Drag Queen* rehearses a timeworn tale – twins separated at birth are reunited – to unsettle the gay/straight, male/female binaries underpinning the twin studies. Gay lawyer Mitchell and flamboyant entertainer Kitten Caboodle may be identical twins, but are far from exactly alike. Their story illustrates the problems with categorising sexual orientation in an either/or fashion – *either* heterosexual *or* homosexual – as twin studies tend to do. And it questions the usefulness of understanding identity in terms of *either* a core of being *or* self-invention. As such the novel serves as a commentary not only on debates about heredity and environment, but on current tensions in ways of conceiving of identity.

The extensive use of twins to depict fissures in national, ethnic or cultural identity is the focus of Chapter 6 ('Twins and Nations'). The tradition goes back to ancient myths of the founding of cities and civilisations by rival twins such as Romulus and Remus, Jacob and Esau, and reflects the perennial conflicts dividing peoples. Unlike these legends of fraternal twins, twentieth-century narratives of such conflicts most commonly feature identical twins: the 'brotherhood of nations' is represented in terms of an underlying sameness beneath superficial cultural differences, whether in Cold War Europe or across the India/Pakistan border. The assumption of resemblance as the basis for harmonious relations between cultures is, however,

problematic in a postcolonial world of hybrid identities and multi-ethnic nations. This can be seen in Marie-Thérèse Humbert's novel *A l'autre bout de moi* (1979), in which the twinship of Creole sisters reflects the cultural tensions dividing the island of Mauritius. Here conflicting discourses of subjectivity put the twins' resemblance in doubt, and in doing so allow a glimpse of a more sophisticated concept of cultural identity, based on shifting identifications rather than common traits. Surveying together the uses of twins to tell tales of nations shows shifting understandings of the origins of communal strife and the preconditions for peace.

Chapter 7 ('Twins as Doubtful Doubles') focuses on two instances in which twins and doubles are openly mocked as hackneyed narrative devices, and yet are simultaneously used to create a highly innovative novel in one case, screenplay in the other. When, in Nabokov's novel *Despair* (1965), Hermann Karlovitch meets his own spitting image, a perfect double he could kill in order to claim his own life insurance, the catch is that he alone can see the resemblance. A parody of literature of the double, the novel is widely regarded as a symptom of its decline. However Nabokov's joke can be seen to herald the emergence of a distinctly postmodern discourse of the double in which likeness is uncertain and subjective, a discourse evident in novels by Amis, Auster, Kristof and Monette, and in films by Fassbinder and Buñuel, with perhaps the most memorable incarnation of the unlikely lookalike being Danny de Vito and Arnold Schwarzenegger in Reitman's *Twins* (1988). *Despair* thus represents a moment of newness as much as a reckoning with the past. Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002) is a twin film that sheds light on this process of repetition and renewal. Screenwriter Charlie Kaufman puts himself in the film together with a fictional identical twin brother, and plays ironically with the notions of triteness and novelty in self-referential commentary on cinematic ploys and clichés. If the twin plot is predictable, its grafting on to the film adaptation of a botanical study is not. The ironic quotation and recontextualisation of the twin motif exemplifies a postmodern approach to originality. The film thus explicitly engages with questions underlying the various narrative uses of twins explored in this book, asking what is entailed in retelling a familiar tale, and how it can be put to new purposes. It makes us wonder whether identical twins themselves, in their sameness-and-difference, might not serve as a contemporary metaphor for creativity.

The final section (Chapter 8 'Twins and Problems of Representation') brings the threads of discussion together. It starts by sketching parallels between some rather disparate twin tales by Angela Carter, Margaret

Laurence and Marilyn Bowering. Each uses twins to disturb the genealogical line and question notions of legitimacy. This pattern mirrors the unruly history of twin tales, which takes multiple directions across a wide variety of genres, and never more so than in the late twentieth century. The clusters identified throughout the book do not indicate one persistent theme or a single overriding meaning for the profusion of twin tales in contemporary culture. They do however point to a concentration of cultural energy in certain domains. Unlike earlier manifestations, contemporary twin tales tend not to evoke questions of righteousness, the duality of man, or the relation between material and spiritual dimensions. Instead their focus is more often directed towards questions of gender, relationships and identity – whether personal, cultural or sexual.

These emphases are unsurprising when we note the obsession with the refashioning of the self in an era of hyper-individualism, and when we consider the importance, in Western cultures, of debates over gender roles, the redefinition of the family, sexualities and the hybridisation of national cultures at the close of the twentieth century. The question remains as to why twins stand out as a particularly appropriate figure to embody these issues. Is it merely because twins are readily available as metaphors for the self in conflict, for the couple, for any duality? Here we might look to theory, for it is hardly coincidental that the motifs of doubling and repetition have figured prominently in psychoanalytical and philosophical discourses during the last half-century. The elaboration of Freud's legacy by Jacques Lacan led to the 'split subject' being seen as the norm of selfhood rather than the exception. Gilles Deleuze pointed to repetition as the key to understanding difference. Jacques Derrida explained self-presence – the notion that one is present and identical to oneself – as an illusion created by the infinitesimal discrepancy in time and space between instances of the self. More recently, Judith Butler has theorised gender identity as an effect produced by the reiterative performance of gender roles.

Tales of identical twins usefully foreground questions of reiteration and splitting, and thus provide an ideal opportunity to explore these conceptual shifts, which underlie the questions relating to identity and difference raised in some of the chapters. No less important than this theoretical dimension, however, are the specific problems of representation that twins are used to address: how to depict soul-mate relationships, the ideal woman, bodies that inspire horror, homosexual stereotypes, ethnic tensions, the writer. In each case, the insistent repetition of a given twin tale indicates a cultural hotspot, a point at which the desire to tell the same story again confronts the need to tell it differently.

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# 1

## Look Twice: Narrative Uses of Twins

### **At first glance: a profusion of twin tales, a multitude of meanings**

Twin tales are told and retold with astonishing frequency in contemporary culture. Newspapers give front-page prominence to accounts of the birth or surgical separation of conjoined babies, to twins dying of simultaneous heart attacks or bicycle accidents, to twins in crime and twins in sport. The reunion of twins separated at birth and the coincidences that mark their lives are the subject of feature articles and television documentaries. Scientific journals tell stories of twins raised apart and twins raised together. And these are only the tales that claim factual status. Narratives of twins also abound in all manner of imaginative creations. They populate short and feature films in the genres of comedy, drama, thriller, horror, sci-fi, porn, film noir, children's films, action and auteur cinema, and appear regularly in fiction ranging from police procedural novels to picaresque historical volumes, from the Bildungsroman to lesbian satire, from Booker Prize winners to supermarket romance novels.

In addition to these public genres of story-telling, twin tales are recounted in conversation. As a frantic mother of new-born twins, venturing out with the double stroller, I was constantly treated to anecdotes and life histories of twins from complete strangers. The author Michel Tournier recounts similar experiences and puts them down to the mythic nature of twin tales:

*A myth is a story that everyone already knows.* When I was writing *Gemini* I replied to those who enquired about the subject of my next novel: it's the adventures of two absolutely identical twin brothers.