PART I

Sisters as Artists in the Cinematic *Künstlerroman*

As a rule there is only one person an English girl hates more than she hates her eldest sister, and that's her mother.

George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*

Reengagement with the actual sister of our early years is only the beginning; it leads to an exploration of the ongoing meaning of that relationship throughout our lives, toward an understanding of how it reappears, transformed, in many of our friendships and love affairs, and to a deeply challenging revisioning of our innermost self. . . . It is the interactions among sisters that instigate the heroine's journey toward self, toward psyche.

Christine Downing, *Psyche's Sisters*

Always aware of the poet's intuitive understanding of psychoanalytic propositions, Sigmund Freud quoted this passage from Shaw's *Man and Superman* in his lecture "The Archaic Features and Infantilism of Dreams" to illustrate the often intense and prolonged rivalry between siblings for parental love, common possessions, and living space within the family.[1] Although Freud stressed the sexual rivalry between siblings of the same gender, he did not analyze the

sister relationship in particular, perhaps because—like the mother-daughter bond—it was too "foreign" to him, a "dark continent." In contrast, Christine Downing's neo-Jungian reevaluation of the sister bond in her 1988 book, *Psyche's Sisters: Re-Imagining the Meaning of Sisterhood*, which describes the lifelong maturational role played by the sister relationship in women's inner lives and development, argues that "our sisterly relationships challenge and nurture us, even as we sometimes disappoint and betray one another."[2] These two views of the psychological significance of sisters—that of rivals versus developmental guides—reflect the contradictory "narratives" of sibling relationships found generally in psychoanalytic theory.[3]

Perhaps not surprisingly, these opposing perspectives also inform cultural representations of sisters and critical discourse on sisterhood. On the level of popular culture, as Lucy Fischer has pointed out, the Freudian model of oedipal competition between siblings underpinned the Hollywood sister melodramas of the 1940s, a genre that always involved good and evil twins vying with each other for male love and attention.[4] This formulaic scenario of romantic and sexual competition between sisters and female characters generally is, of course, still ubiquitous in Hollywood cinema, television, and romance literature. Since the 1980s, however, a new wave of women's cinema has surfaced in popular culture that challenges the old formula. Films such as *Beaches* (1988), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), *How To Make an American Quilt* (1995), *Boys on the Side* (1995), and *The First Wives Club* (1996) offer images that accentuate the nurturing and supportive roles played by women in each other's lives as they confront male domination and exploitation or as they deal with changing social expectations and emotional needs. In effect, these popular works cast into metaphorical terms the developmental perspective Christine Downing articulated in respect to biological sisters, but in many cases they also sentimentalize the sisterly bonds between female friends, and to some degree carry into the cultural mainstream the utopian fantasies of sisterhood that arose in U.S. feminism during the 1970s.[5]

My discussion of Australian director Gillian Armstrong's 1994 film version of *Little Women* considers this idealistic strand of post-1960s women's cinema. A neoromantic rendering of Louisa May Alcott's novel, the film merges the narrative traditions of sentimental fiction informing Alcott's 1868 novel with the melodramatic conventions of the classic woman's film (a longstanding Hollywood genre partly derived

from the nineteenth-century sentimental novel). But Armstrong and screenwriter Robin Swicord also update *Little Women* to appeal to a new generation of U.S. moviegoers. The film foregrounds the "tomboyish" Jo March, focusing on her growth as a female writer and her emotional struggle to come to terms with the death of her closest sister.

Since the silent film era, writers, painters, sculptors, musicians, actors, and other artists have served as popular cinematic subjects. However, the vast majority of films that focus on the lives of artistic women, such as *Camille Claudel* (1990), *Artemesia* (1998), or Gillian Armstrong's own earlier film about Australian writer Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career* (1979), have depicted female artists struggling to assert themselves in a traditionally male-dominated realm. In *Little Women*, Armstrong associates Jo's artistic growth with her social and emotional affiliation with a close-knit community of women. This is also true of director Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table* (1990), adapted from the 1989 autobiography of New Zealand writer Janet Frame. Indeed, as cinematic versions of the female *Künstlerroman*, Armstrong's *Little Women* and Campion's *An Angel at My Table* are thematically and situationally linked: both explore the experiences of women writers in a homosocial context, treating the powerful intersubjective role of sisters in shaping the identities of their central protagonists.[6] In this respect, both works align themselves, if not with a larger biographical genre of female-artist films, then with a different vein of post-1960s filmmaking—women's cinematic autobiographies.

In autobiographical films such as Michelle Citron's *Daughter-Rite*, Diane Kurys's *Entre Nous*, and Nadia Trintignant's *Next Summer*, Catherine Portuges identifies "a tendency to situate the female protagonists in a scenario that highlights links among people rather than the isolated heroine surveying her world," which "suggests a sensibility at once more attuned to and more embedded within a social world than those of their male counterparts."[7] Although *Little Women* and *Angel at My Table* are hardly as experimental as these autobiographies, the films are nonetheless based on literary works by women that also stress the social connections informing the actions and consciousness of female protagonists. Much like the contemporary coming-of-age films about sisters that I treat in part 2, *Little Women* and *An Angel at My Table* embody a female-centered account of women's self-definition and development, realizing in the cinema what feminist literary scholars have defined as a "relational self" in women's writing: "Women characters,

more psychologically embedded in relationships, sometimes share the formative voyage [of psychological maturation] with friends, sisters, or mothers, who assume equal status as protagonists."[8] Feminist critics, in their analysis of women's narrative self-representations, have drawn widely on this interrelational model of female development. Whereas traditional initiation stories centering on males have often stressed the hero's psychological need to separate from the parent, feminist theorists have emphasized the importance of the social, intersubjective world in young women's journeys toward adult identities.

Unfortunately, feminist critics have primarily discussed the relational self in women's narratives only in connection to the daughter's lifelong entanglement and ambivalent attachment to the mother, relying heavily on the concept of the preoedipal mother-daughter bond.[9] Often overlooked is the horizontal, intragenerational relationship between sisters that impacts so many women's lives, as the sister films I treat in these pages reveal.

In the films *Little Women* and *An Angel at My Table* the influence of sisters on women's identity formation is framed by the theme of creativity. Bound together in childhood worlds of play and fantasy, sisters in these two films assume the psychological function that D. W. Winnicott has characterized as a maternal mirroring face, an intimate other sensitively attuned to the emotional experience of her sibling.[10] Moreover, in both films sisters serve as alternate selves, questioning or challenging their sibling's values and beliefs.

The nature of the sisters' influence on the female artist is more profoundly problematized by Jane Campion in *An Angel at My Table* than by Gillian Armstrong in *Little Women*. *Little Women* is essentially nostalgic in its rendering of sisters' symbiotic relationships, while Campion's film explores the shifting and ambivalent emotions that lie below the surface of the sister bond. While Jo March's sisters inspire her development as a writer, Campion's film presents as antiromantic the complicated and painful process by which Janet Frame extricates herself from the social conventions of femininity her sisters embodied for her. Although the portrayals of sisterhood in both films bear out Jackie Stacey's assertion that women on-screen and off define themselves actively rather than passively through a female other, Campion's film reveals that the intersubjective relationship between sisters involves identifications arising not only from commonalities but also from differences.[11]