

# THE FEMME FATALE

*A self-fulfilling prophecy*



Figure 0: Louisa, one of the main characters in *WIR SIND DIE NACHT* (Gansel, 2010)

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. “Woman for man, is death”</b>	
<b><i>Theorizing the monstrous feminine: the origin, the politics and the pitfalls</i></b>	<b>4</b>
2.1 <i>Medusa: mother of monsters</i>	5
2.2 <i>Abjectifying woman</i>	6
2.3 <i>The Femme Fatale: woman without a head</i>	7
<b>3. Bloody women: a contemporary reworking of the monstrous feminine in WIR SIND DIE NACHT</b>	<b>9</b>
3.1 <i>The menstrual monster</i>	10
3.2 <i>“You can either let their world destroy you, or create your own”     – A case study of Wir Sind Die Nacht.</i>	10
3.2.1 <i>Abjection=freedom</i>	11
3.2.2 <i>Feminine rituals</i>	13
<b>4. Monstrosity for emancipation: self-fulfilling prophecy? Conclusion</b>	<b>14</b>

## **Abstract**

In this thesis, I attempt to investigate how the cultural myth of the femme fatale is reworked in contemporary culture and what its emancipatory potential might be. Based on theories of Barbara Creed and Julia Kristeva, I argue that the femme fatale is a reworking of the monstrous feminine, which has always been an abject creature. The emancipatory potential of the femme fatale is hence questioned, as these women are often products of the masculine fear for women. Firstly, a theoretical framework is established by looking into the concepts of the monstrous feminine and abjection and feminist criticism on these concepts. Secondly, an analysis of a recent fantasy/drama film is done, in order to study the iteration or subversion of representing woman as monstrous, abject. Finally, I hope to study the emancipatory potential of the femme fatale more in general. Does she offer images of independent women, or is she merely a constructed to maintain patriarchal values?

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

For centuries the femme fatale has been a cultural myth in Western society. Depictions of her emerged in fin-de-siècle paintings and were typical for the films noir made in the 1940s of the twentieth century. And also in contemporary media like video games, she remains a trope, often in a more digitalized form like the gynoid, a robot which resembles the female body. It is remarkable how the concept seems to appeal to both men and women, for very different reasons. Men are drawn to the movie or computer screen to gaze at the highly eroticized bodies of these female heroines. But nowadays, young women are also drawn towards them, often identifying with these female cops, robots or supernatural creatures because they are fierce, independent and in charge.

However, her independency and emancipatory potential can be questioned. The femme fatale is after all a product of the masculin imagination, which led many feminist theorists to debate about the sense of emancipation in representations of these women. According to Smellk, the femme fatale in Hollywood movies “might be strong and invincible, but at the same hand she is often also unlikely beautiful” (2007: 187). Hence, she can be perceived as a role model for independent women, as well as a creation for the male gaze. Additionally, as Hélène Cixous (1981) already pointed out, there seems to be a tendency to associate women, their bodies and their sexuality with immorality and danger, death even. This of course contrasts highly with the notion of emancipation and demands a closer look to the concept of the ‘femme fatale’.

*In this thesis, firstly I will examine in which context the cultural myth of the femme fatale has emerged.* Drawing on theories of Barbara Creed, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous about the monstrous feminine, it will become clear how women and their sexuality have often been related to fear and the abject in Western society. Feminist theorists have therefore stressed that these lethal but gorgeous women are ambiguous figures in a complicated power struggle. Under her beautiful surface, the femme fatale might be nothing more than a reflection of man’s fear for woman.

Secondly, in a case study of Dennis Gansel's *WIR SIND DIE NACHT* (2010), it will become clear how representations of the contemporary femme fatale haven't transcended the age old notion of the monstrous feminine yet. This story about four female vampires, illustrates how key aspects of the monstrous feminine still linger in contemporary visualizations of femmes fatales. Keeping in mind Judith Butler's (1993) notion of performativity, this movie educates us about the stereotypical image of femininity, which in the case of the monstrous feminine is always intertwined with danger.

While studying this movie, I am also questioning the emancipatory potential of the femme fatales that are portrayed. On the one hand, the movie will turn out to be yet another reiteration of the monstrous feminine, keeping the characters out of the symbolic order, the normal world. On the other hand, a more women-friendly reading of the movie is possible, since aspects of sisterhood and agency are present in the narrative and the female monsters give a critique on phallogentric society.

Finally, I hope to assess the emancipatory dimension of the femme fatale more in general. Is she offering a way to represent female agency? Or is she, even in modern media, still merely a trendy version of the monstrous feminine and therefore keeping women in their subordinate place in society?

## **2. "WOMAN FOR MAN, IS DEATH"**

### ***Theorizing the monstrous feminine: the politics and the pitfalls.***

The femme fatale has always been a well-known archetype in literature, art and movies. In his book *Idols of Perversity - Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, Bram Dijkstra (1986) offers an outline of the concept's history. The tradition of the femme fatale is long and versatile and can be traced back as far as ancient Egypt, with its iconic Cleopatra. Especially in the fine arts, the femme fatale has been portrayed in many metaphorical ways: as a vampire, nymph, fallen angel or sorceress. She flourished in the 1940's century film noir, where the combination of aggressiveness and sensuality in women was a central topic (Place, 1998: 57). And in contemporary Hollywood block busters, tempting and lethal women can be found as well: Sharon Stone in *BASIC INSTINCT* (1992), the Bond Girls or Renee Zellweger and Catherine Zeta-Jones in *CHICAGO* (2002) were all very seductive, but dangerous.

Hence, based on van Dijkstra's extensive historiography, the femme fatale can be defined as a woman who is mysteriously seductive and uses this quality to outsmart men. Her resistance against male domination exists of beauty, charm and sexual allure: she tempts the male target and drives him crazy by denying him her affection. (1986, 237) To summarize: key aspects of the femme fatale are mystery, beauty, seduction and, most importantly, danger. But what kind of threat does she pose and to whom? And what could be the political agenda behind



Figure 1: Michelangelo da Caravaggio.  
Medusa's Head. Oil on convex wood.  
1600 – 1601. Florence, Uffizi.

the consistent representation of woman as attractive, yet dangerous? To answer this question, we start our journey ages ago, in the era of Greek mythology.

## 2.1 Medusa: mother of the monsters

Medusa, as seen in figure 1, with her evil eyes and serpents instead of hair, is literally and symbolically not a woman that one would like to look at. She is “queen of the pantheon of female monsters; men unfortunate

enough to look at her were turned immediately to stone.” (Creed, 1986: 44) She is the typical female monster, for the manner in which she so clearly illustrates the killing powers attributed to women by

men. Here monstrosity serves as a warning sign, creating a barrier between object and subject (the, probably male, viewer). (Bal, 1996: 59) The destiny of this female monster is determined: only negation and rejection out of the field of sight can maintain the social status quo. And although she shouts out to us, inviting us to follow her gaze and look for the true cause of danger, the risk is too big to pay any attention to her.

Medusa's representation as a monstrous feminine is one among many visualizations of man's fear for woman. This fear was described elaborately for the first time in Sigmund Freud's essay on castration anxiety, which is related intimately to the idea of sexual difference. In Freud's work, masculine sexuality is constructed as the norm, which causes female sexuality to be perceived as deviant. The lack of the male genitals troubles the phallogentric order and is therefore often a central aspect in depictions of the monstrous feminine. (Freud, 1981: 354) Symbolically, this notion of sexual difference is also present in the representation of Medusa. According to Freud, Medusa's severed head signifies the terrifying castrated female genitals, for which the snakes around her head are compensation, functioning as phallic symbols. (Garber & Vickers: 2003: 199)

And she doesn't only express this castration anxiety in a semiotic way. The narrative of the myth is also saturated with man's fear for women. Medusa was said to have promiscuously flirted with Poseidon. As punishment for this immoral behavior, Athena turned her into a monster, turning her hair into serpents and making her gaze lethal. Now it was up to Perseus, to defeat this monster. By avoiding her gaze and using only her reflection in the mirror, he was able to behead her. Triumphantly, Medusa's head was now used to counter evil forces. Thus, although Medusa initially stood for rebellion, immorality and promiscuity, later she became “a beneficial emblem and a source of civic and martial strength”. (Garber & Vickers, 2003: 2)

## 2.2 Abjectifying<sup>1</sup> woman

The mythological narrative of Medusa is almost like a blueprint for all the following stories, be it visual or written down, about dangerous women. According to feminist movie theorist Barbara Creed, in a lot of contemporary texts, definitions of the monstrous feminine seem grounded in ancient relational and historical notions of sexual difference. Gender is of utmost importance in this construction of the feminine danger. The term 'monstrous feminine' is therefore used instead of 'female monster', to emphasize how monstrosity is tightly connected with woman's sexuality. (Creed, 1993: 3)

It is the deviant character of this feminine sexuality which ultimately leads to abjection. In her well-known work *Powers of Horror*, the French philosopher Julia Kristeva (1982) coined this term, referring to our reaction of horror to a threatened breakdown in meaning, caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. The concept turned out highly useful to feminists in understanding why women are so often portrayed as malicious: as abject.

The abject has taken many forms over the ages. Abjection has for instance been visualized as sexual immorality and corporeal alteration, of which figure 2 is an example. This work of Fernand Khnopff shows another example of serpents, replacing the male genitals, symbolizing immoral sexuality. Additionally, decay and death, as well as murder and bodily wastes are visualizations of the abject.

The ultimate form of abjection is the corpse: the body without a soul. After all, the living body is able to expel the loathsome, something which corpses can no longer do since they are expelled themselves. (Creed, 1986: 47) In horror movies, this ultimate abject often takes shape in creatures like zombies and vampires. They are also significantly abject, not only because they have expired, but mainly because they are purposely disseminating their immortality. Their moral inferiority thus becomes contagious.

The concept of abjection might not seem gender specific yet. Kristeva however offers a closer look on the specific connection of the concept with womanhood. She argues that in visual as

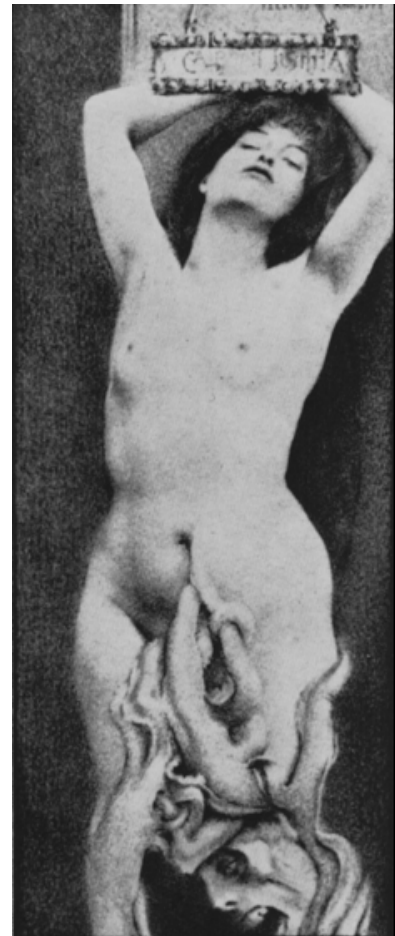


Figure 2: Fernand Khnopff, Istar. Chalk on paper, 1888. Babylon.

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that Kristeva has never used the concept of 'abjectification'. However, I would like to appropriate her concept in this manner, to emphasise the way the way one *becomes* an abject. You are not born as abject, this status is the result of a cultural and political *process*. Being inspired by Cixous, who has encouraged women to create their own language, I hope to make a contribution to the discourse on the abject, rather than to rip Kristeva's terms out of it's context.

well as textual narratives, the abject posits the controlled and rational soul versus the unreliable and hedonistic (often female) body. The abject monstrous feminine doesn't respect paternalistic borders and disturbs the established order. A recurring theme of the abject in literature and movies has therefore been the maternal. In horror movies, the abject is often visualised in the form of the archaic mother.

To understand the connection between the maternal and the abject, some psychoanalytical background information is required. According to psychoanalysis, the relationship between a child and its mother (or metaphorically, the feminine) is always a site of conflict. Kristeva points this out by distinguishing the maternal authority from the paternal law (1982: 64), which can be illustrated when we look at our youth. Our first encounter with authority is the moment our mother teaches us how to keep our body proper. We are then in touch with our own bodies without shame or guilt. However, since playing with bodily wastes isn't socially accepted, we must leave this abject maternal area and the mother must loosen her grip on her child. For it is only when the mother lets go of her infant, that it can take up its proper place in the paternalistic society, where social codes and discourses form the new authority. And although we are apt to succumb to the comforting maternal care, in the end, we submit ourselves to the social conventions disciplining the body. (Creed, 1993: 12)

The archaic mother however refuses to let go of her child, which poses a threat to the paternal law. In constantly portraying the maternal figure as an abject entity, the phallogocentric symbolic order forces a separation of the child and its mother, which is necessary to maintain its own power and *raison d'être*. (Creed, 1993: 69) And as the maternal is always constructed as abject, women are almost always connotatively linked to immorality and danger. They are, in other words, always implicitly abjectified.

To summarize, the abject can be seen schematically as a confrontational field in between two poles, where meaning is questioned. Abjection appears to be ambiguous: on the one hand, we are gripped by the abject, on the other hand we remain aware of the need to repel it for self-annihilation. (Creed, 1986: 45, 48) This ambiguity is also present in an omnipresent form of the abject: the archaic mother. Her care for us is comforting, but must also be restricted if we want to grow up and take our positions in the 'real' world which evolves around paternal laws.

### **2.3 The femme fatale: woman without a head**

Kristeva is exploring the ways in which abjection, as a source of horror, is an important cogwheel in the machine called phallogocentrism. As the dynamics of abjection are central in all visualisations of monstrous women and femme fatales, it is important to look at its political dimension. Kristeva describes how depictions of the abject help to separate the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject. Since the abject is "the place where meaning collapses", and as it "threatens life; it must be radically excluded"

(1982: 2) The monstrous feminine fits this description: she crosses the symbolic borders of the phallogentric society, taking up unexpected gender roles and displaying bodily disfigurement. Hence, she threatens to the phallogentric order and functions as a warning sign to illustrate immoral behaviour, implicitly affirming what is moral instead.

From this perspective, Medusa's ban from the visual field is a metaphor for the excluding mechanism that all depictions of women as monstrous and dangerous entail. Following that line of thought, Creed argues that the central project of the contemporary horror film is to demonstrate to it's public the abject, to finally, "re-draw the boundaries" (1986: 53). The monstrous woman is publicly disgraced to assure that she will not threaten the stability of the masculine order.

The story of abjection is a dualistic one: it contrasts man against woman, the rational soul against the savage body and always circles around a certain tendency. Men do long for women, but since they also pose a threat to their dominant place they must resist the temptation. As Creed puts it: "The story of the Garden of Eden and man's fall from grace sets up 'a *diabolical otherness* in relation to the divine'. (Kristeva, 1982, 127)" (1993: 42, my emphasis) This diabolic otherness enables man to place himself in a superior position. If it wasn't for woman's lack, man could not signify himself this decisively.

In many contemporary horror stories, woman is never the normative and positive character, according to Creed. Later on, I would like to take her argument a step further, and demonstrate how it is not only the genre of horror, which posits women as the abject. Monstrous females and femme fatales are omnipresent in the media landscape of the twentyfirst century and remain a cultural myth to support a 'male economy' (Cixous, 1981: 42) In this male economy, Cixous argues:

*"It's a question of submitting feminine disorder, its laughter, its inability to take the drumbeats seriously, to the threat of decapitation. If man operates under the threat of castration, if masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex, anxiety is its displacement as decapitation, execution of woman (...)" (1981: 43, my emphasis)*

Her metaphorical story makes clear how women are being silenced by this male drum beat, how they are turned to soldiers by force. Men have become 'sex cops', determining what sexuality should be about, representing female bodies and sexuality exclusively from their own perspective. Keeping this in mind, the presence of the monstrous feminine tells us more about male fears than about female desires and sexuality. (Creed, 1993: 7)

Cixous, like Kristeva, argues that the monstrous feminine is a dubious character. On the one hand, she is obligated to be virile, on the other hand woman is always seen as a dark continent which can dangerously absorb men. She is structured along the lines of "the infamous logic of



the antilove”: woman is of no good, but at the same time she is, because it’s the mystery surrounding her which legitimates male domination. (1976: 878)

However, the major danger, according to Cixous, is not woman, but her non-existence. When representations of women stay designed to sooth male castration anxiety, she will remain decapitated like Medusa. Man’s fear of castration is backlashing on women, resulting in the loss of her head. And if woman has no head, she cannot speak and create her own idea of sexuality.

Nowadays, women are “unacknowledged sovereigns” (Cixous, 1976: 876), as they are taught to be ashamed of themselves under the paternal law. They are accused of being monsters, when re-entering the maternal terrain again. It’s problematic that men fear women, but perhaps even more treacherous that *women fear to be women*. They succumb too easily to “the false theatre of phallogentric representationalism” and force themselves to resemble images that are given to them, but not created in their benefit. (Cixous, 1976: 884)

Is Cixous’ criticism from a few decades ago still relevant, when we look at contemporary femme fatales? Does the notion of the monstrous feminine still linger in representations of these women? And if so, are they still posited as the abject, including the oppression this entails?

### **3. BLOODY WOMEN**

#### ***A contemporary reworking of the monstrous feminine in WE ARE THE NIGHT***

The monstrous feminine has often taken shape in the figure of the female vampire. Film historian David J. Hogan remarks that the first cinematic appearances of female vampires were in a genre which he calls the ‘cinema of lost women’, as he labels the films made in the first decades of the twentieth century, in which women are deliberately living their lives without men. (Creed, 1993: 4) Due to the increasing popularity of vampire movies and television series in the last two decades, this lethal woman is once more omnipresent in Western visual culture. In the 1990’s the female vampire made it’s way to the landscape of popular teen media through television series like *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*. More recently, the TWILIGHT SAGA (2009 – 2012) after the bestselling books of Stephenie Meyer, has become immensely popular.

It is not difficult to categorize the vampire as an abject figure, after our previous definition of this concept. Vampires are the ultimate abjects: bodies without souls, looking for possibilities to spread their immortality. They are distorting the order by taking on a transgressive lifestyle, sleeping by day and living at night. The vampire is a taboo-breaker, monstrous, uncanny and living underground, “below the operatic overtones of the dominant.” (Case, 1991: 4)

Remarkable about these creatures is mainly how they have entered the realm of the invisible, as they can’t stand the sunlight and lack a reflection in the mirror. This vanishing and hiding from the normal world is almost a literal translation of the dynamics of abjection. Another utterance of the abject can be found in their corporeal alteration, which is of course the case

when the vampire turns into a bat, or earlier on, when a human being turns into this immortal creature. Other themes of abjection, like decay, death and murder are also traits of the vampire, as he or she needs to kill in order to stay 'alive'. And lastly, like all monstrous feminines, the female vampire can literally only be exterminated by decapitation.

### **3.1 The menstrual monster**

The red thread through all vampire narratives is of course that of a certain bodily waste: blood. The abjection of blood is obvious, as many people are afraid of it or find it loathsome. We experience blood as unproper, something that needs to be cleaned up or hidden under a bandaid. But the theme of blood has a deeper notion of abjection to it, which requires more explanation. Additionally, as blood is specifically related to women, because of its association with menstruation and fertility, it is an important aspect of the 'vampiristic feminine'.<sup>2</sup>

Firstly, the image of blood signifies a breaking between the maternal authority and the paternal law that Kristeva describes. The bleeding that emerges underlines woman's alliance to nature, as it is an indication of her fertility. In addition, a girl's first menstruation amplifies her link to the maternal authority, as it is often the mother who learns her daughter how to deal with this new physical state. In this line of thought, the vampire can be interpreted as a rite of passage. In the case of female vampires, this is a passage towards the feminine realm, as a girl truly becomes a woman after her first 'bleeding'. Poets Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove emphasize the analogy of altered states after being bitten or having had one's first period (Creed, 1993: 65). After the transformation, female vampires often wake up with a predatory desire. Might this be the same kind of desire that starts to stir in teenage girls when they become officially sexually productive? This activated sexuality is also key to the female vampire, who is the sexual initiator, the active agent. Case calls this the 'vampiristic position', in which one "waits, strikes and soils the living." (1997: 386) Female vampires are therefore sexual hunters, instead of prey, active and autonomous agents. The passage towards femininity is hereby intrinsically associated with a turn towards monstrous and abject behaviour.

Blood as a trope works ambiguously: it signifies death and passivity, but as we have seen with the assertive female vampire, it also refers to life and activity, which makes it an "interesting semantic crossroad". (Kristeva, 1982:59) The female vampire thus seems an interesting opportunity to reset the boundaries between the abject and the norm, the excluded and the included. After all, vampires advance in fog and gloom, the twilight, "a dangerous territory where opposing terms are not so easy distinguishable". (Case, 1997: 393) Being invisible enables her to do things a 'regular' woman in the established order cannot. Could a

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<sup>2</sup> This term is my adaptation and reworking of the concept 'monstrous feminine'. The vampiristic feminine is a subcategory of the monstrous feminine, keeping in mind the vampiristic position that Case points out. The vampiristic feminine is specifically characterised by anonymity, which on the one hand enables a surprise attack, but on the other hand designates her to the dark.

representation of the vampiristic feminine therefore offer a way to a female perspective on sexuality? Or does her anonymity decapitate her in the same manner as her monstrous sisters?

### **3.2 “You can either let their world destroy you, or create your own” – A case study of WIR SIND DIE NACHT.**

In 2010, Dennis Gansel’s WIR SIND DIE NACHT (or, WE ARE THE NIGHT) was released in the midst of the vampire frenzy that started in the nineties. This fantasy/drama-movie tells the story of a group of female vampires, who create and adopt a fourth member, Lena. The vampires teach Lena how to live her new ‘life’ and show her how wonderful this will be: they can party as much as they want to, without being physically restricted by aging processes. Most importantly: their world is strictly feminine, no men are allowed. That means “kein König, kein Chef, kein Ehemann”: “Lang lebe die Emanzipation!”.<sup>3</sup> I will analyse the scenes in which Lena transforms into a vampire, since they clearly delineate and praises the abject as liberating, feminine domain.

#### **3.2.1: Abjection = freedom**

The field of the abject is immediately demarcated in the film, as the opening scene shows the ultimate abject: corpses that the female vampires have created on a hijacked airplane. We see the three female vampires, each one of them very beautiful, but dripping with blood. The motive of abject also occurs in the figure of the archaic mother, as Louisa is clearly positioned as the leader of the pack. She has started this sisterhood by transforming Charlotte and Nora and is determined to safeguard their lifestyle.

Then we enter the border zone between the normal and the abject, when we get to know Lena, who is a tomboy and somewhat of an outlaw. Like the abject, Lena doesn’t accept borders. She has an androgynous appearance and tries to get away with pickpocketing by changing into a dress after the crime, mocking traditional gender roles. Lena’s looks and behaviour already tell us that she doesn’t fit in the patriarchal society and is trying to create an alternative, queer identity for herself, but is misunderstood. This scepticism towards the patriarchal society is also noticeable in her surroundings, for instance when she walks up to her house and we see the words “Liebt” “Dich” “Jesus” on the walls.

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<sup>3</sup> Louisa and Nora explain their lifestyle to Lena. (WIR SIND DIE NACHT, 00:38:40)



Figure 3: The patriarchal order is questioned implicitly, by the writings on the wall: “Liebt dich Jesus?”

One night, when she is dwelling through Berlin, she discovers a foggy and gloomy old amusement park and is drawn by the sound of techno music. The abject sphere is signified in these scenes by the underground party where the three female vampires operate. Next up are shots of people behaving promiscuously and taking all sorts of drugs, acting immorally outside of the public domain. On the dance floor, Louisa and Lena meet for the first time. At the bar, Lena tells Louisa that she has chosen to live her life differently, to which Louisa agrees: “You can either let your world destroy you, or you create your own.” Lena, already moving along the borders of the patriarchal world, might be suitable for the alternative, feminine vampiristic lifestyle. Louisa thus sneaks up to Lena, who is still balancing on the thin line between the normal and the abject: though appealed by the abject, Louisa still gives Lena an uncanny feeling, uttered by goosebumps (figure 4).



Figure 4: Lena balancing on the boundary between abject and normal: although Lena is intrigued by her, Louisa gives her goosebumps.

But Louisa isn't part of the visible realm, which enables her to attack Lena from behind and lure her into her abject world . With one bite in the neck, Lena leaves the patriarchal world and is transformed into a monstrous feminine.

In Lena's transformation, we see the process of abjectification. She satisfies her unconscious crave of blood by eating raw meat. If we follow Kristeva's logic, eating the raw meat clearly posits Lena outside of the 'normal' world: "Food becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories. A boundary between nature and culture, between the human and the non-human." (1982: 75).

### **3.2.2 Feminine rituals**

Of course, her androgynous appearance is still highly contrasting with the hyperfeminine vampires. However in bath, which can be seen as a metaphor for the womb, a return towards the maternal, the abject is erased as she loses her blood stains, and her short haircut grows into wavy long hair, like Medusa's serpents (figure 5). Lena is now handed over to the maternal authority, as Louisa teaches her how to dress and act like a woman, showing her the pleasures of this exclusive feminine lifestyle. Lena has literally and symbolically turned into a vamp.



Figure 5: In the bathwater, Lena's hair grows and winds around her head, like Medusa's serpents.

Feminist theorist Judith Butler has described how gender becomes a cultural construct, by reiterating the gender codes generation after generation (1993: 10), which in this story of course takes an extreme form in the infinite lives of the female vampires. Sexuality thus becomes a performance (1993: 107), which is clearly illustrated by the hyperfeminine lifestyle that the vampires are displaying for Lena, filled with expensive clothing, exclusive food and sisterly love. Lena's womanhood is constructed as she imitates the behavior of the other vampires (drinking blood, walking against the ceiling, appropriating their style), learning their 'rituals' by iteration (Butler, 1993: 95). As Lena is clearly happy and relieved in the first part of the film, we could state that under Louisa's wake, Lena is liberated from the Law of the Father and is taught how to be herself without any shame or guilt (Cixous, 1981: 46) .

## 4. MONSTROSITY FOR EMANCIPATION: SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY?

### **Conclusion**

But Lena quickly learns about the downside of this life. The moment she first witnesses her 'sisters' actually killing two men, and drinking blood through the neck instead of cocktailglasses, initiates the excluding of the abject. Lena turns to Tom for help and meets him in the parking lot in front of her house. The writings on the wall now spell "Jesus Liebt Mich", which might be read as a reinstalled trust in the previous, patriarchal mode of society.

Louisa is presented as the archaic mother, constantly following her 'infant' Lena, refusing to relinquish her grip. The maternal force is once again portrayed as a bad alternative for the paternal authority. The narrative of *WIR SIND DIE NACHT* thus stays true to Western tradition of the abject: the movie reveals itself as a ritual to renew the contact with the abject, only to expell it later in order to maintain the establish power relations (Creed, 1986:45).

The ambiguous and fatal quality of the monstrous feminine is immediately touched upon in the movie, as it starts with somewhat sinister music, repeating the phrase 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. This term already hints at the two sides of the 'monstrous feminine', still present in this visualisation of female vampires in the twentyfirst century.

*"The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the original false conception come 'true'. This specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning".*

[Merton, 1968:477, my emphasis]

On the one hand the vampires maintain their freedom as they keep telling themselves that this lifestyle liberates them from the straightjacket that women experience in the 'normal world'. Ultimately, this repetitive lifestyle of sex, drugs and techno-music should provide them the opportunity to live their lives on their own conditions.

But the term 'self-fulfilling prophecy' also indicates naivety, since it's assumptions are based on false premises. It has become clear how the monstrous feminine is a tool to conserve the phallogentric ideology of Western society. Depictions and storytelling on evil women, characterizing them as monstrous, helps to dehumanize them, and to posit man as morally superior. Phallogentric society repells the monstrous feminine like our body rids itself of loathsome food. Representations of the femme fatale will therefore always be an instrument to hinder emancipation to some extent, in order to safeguard power relations between men and women.

To answer the question of emancipation, in my opinion, the femme fatale is a dead end street on the journey to women freely representing their bodies and sexual desires. But is there a

way to challenge the “conventional man” (Cixous, 1976:875)? After all, to ask “Will the real woman please stand up?”, “is like asking the vampire to appear in a mirror, when she is embedded in the dominant discursive mandate to disappear” (Case, 1997:388). Cixous sees a possibility in women representing themselves for a change, since they have been violently driven away from their own bodies. They should refuse to strengthen the hegemonic discourse by repeating the drum beat and create from their own female perspective.

Finally, the femme fatale or monstrous feminine is an agent of dualism, as it draws an opposition between the masculine/the proper and the feminine/the abject and offers no insight in people who are advancing in the border zones. Philosophers like Donna Haraway and Gilles Deleuze have provided ways of thinking in terms of hybrids and relations, rather than oppositions and hierarchies. Film makers, graphic designers and other media producers might want to study their ideas and start creating representations of feminine (and masculin) bodies that transcend the notion of object, subject and in the case of the monstrous feminine, abject.

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### **Movie**

WIR SIND DIE NACHT. Directed by Dennis Gansel. 2010; Berlin: Constantin Film Produktion.

### **List of illustrations**

Figure 0: Still from *Wir Sind Die Nacht*, <http://www.cinemagia.ro/filme/wir-sind-die-nacht-565601/imagini-hires/841421/>, on June 20th, 2012.

Figure 1: Michelangelo da Caravaggio. "Medusa's Head". Oil on convex wood. 1600 – 1601. Florence, Uffizi. <http://www.backtoclassics.com/gallery/caravaggio/medusa/>. On May 23th, 2012.

Figure 2: Fernand Khnopff. "Istar". Chalk on paper, 1888. Babylon. <http://darkclassics.blogspot.nl/2010/11/fernand-khnopff-istar.html>. On May 18th, 2012.

Figure 3: Screenshot from *WIR SIND DIE NACHT*, 00:53:59.

Figure 4: Screenshot from *WIR SIND DIE NACHT*, 00:18:34.

Figure 5: Screenshot from *WIR SIND DIE NACHT*, 00:34:06.