

A reinterpretation of the monstrous feminine: Alexia as a transformative figure in *Titane*



Jessie Bakker

2353016

MCMV22008

27-04-2024

Word count: 9.994

Supervisor: Marijke de Valck

Second reader: Eggo Müller

Index

Abstract	3
1. Introduction	4
2. Theoretical framework	6
2.1. The monstrous feminine	6
2.2 The abject	7
2.3. Womanliness as masquerade.....	8
2.4 Cinematic emotions: dread, terror, and somatic empathy	9
2.4.1. Cinematic dread.....	9
2.4.2. Direct horror	10
2.4.3. Somatic empathy	11
3. Method	12
3.1. Explanation of scenes	12
3.2 Phenomenology and film.....	12
3.3. Phenomenology and affect	13
4. Analysis	14
4.1. First scene: Alexia’s car performance	14
4.1.1. Womanliness as a masquerade	14
4.2 Second scene: from attempted abortion to murder	16
4.2.1. Alexia’s relation to the abject.....	16
4.2.2. Affective shifts: cinematic dread.....	19
4.2.3. From dread to direct horror: underscoring Alexia’s monstrous nature	21
4.3. Third scene: Alexia’s transformation into Adrien	23
4.3.1. Self-mutilation and the process of transformation	23
4.3.2. Masculinity as a mask: transgressing gender boundaries	25
5. Conclusion.....	28
Bibliography.....	30
Internet articles.....	31
Filmography	32

Abstract

This thesis explores the representation of the monstrous feminine figure of Alexia in Julia Ducournau's film *Titane* (2021) and examines its affect on viewers. In this thesis the focus is on arguing how the traditional concept of the monstrous feminine is reinterpreted, portraying Alexia as a figure who challenges boundaries related to gender and the body rather than conforming to stereotypes. My research is guided by the question: "In what ways does *Titane* (2021) represent Alexia as a monstrous feminine figure, and what affect does this representation have on the viewer's embodied experience?" Through the method of phenomenology, I am able to describe viewers' emotions while witnessing Alexia's monstrous feminine character. Here, the focus lies on delineating how viewers are affected by emotions such as dread, direct horror, and somatic empathy, and how these emotions manifest on a bodily level. Throughout the analysis, it is examined how these emotions oscillate, and how specific scenes evoke different responses, all related to viewers being horrified by the monstrous feminine, experiencing dread towards it, yet also being able to sympathize with Alexia and her body.

To diversify my research and strengthen the argument that Alexia is portrayed as a nuanced and reimagined monstrous feminine figure, narrative elements, and representation are also analysed. Concepts from psychoanalysis, such as the abject and womanliness as masquerade, are applied to demonstrate how Alexia constantly challenges gender boundaries and fluctuates in identity. The aspect of her abject, constantly changing pregnant body underscores the fluidity of both her gender and skin. Additionally, the analysis delves into the societal impact of Alexia's representation, arguing how the film evokes messages related to the maternal in society and how it reworks societal norms related to gender and the body.

1. Introduction

When Julia Ducournau's film *Titane* (2021) first premiered, it generated significant publicity, evoking both negative and positive responses. During its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival, it defied all odds and won the Palm d'Or.¹ The film's body horror elements, ranging from mutilated body parts to a graphic abortion scene, elicited strong visceral reactions in viewers, leading to theatre walkouts and reports of individuals fainting and throwing up.² However, amidst these extreme reactions, some critics were able to discern broader themes within the film. Sasha Geffen, for instance, suggests that the portrayal of Alexia's fluctuating gender identity relates to broader themes of transgenderism. Geffen argues that Ducournau, through the representation of Alexia's non-gendered body, challenges and subverts many transphobic clichés.³ Conversely, others critique the portrayal of Alexia as perpetuating transphobic stereotypes. Jude Dry contends that "[...] *Titane* twists these milestones of transition – a beautiful and liberating experience for most trans people – making them painful and grotesque in service of its bent toward body horror."⁴ The diverse array of reactions from viewers and critics initially sparked my interest in writing my thesis on *Titane*, as I believe that the film does not evoke strong (bodily) reactions in viewers solely to horrify and shock the audience, but rather through this, the film actively delves into deeper themes such as gender, sexuality, and the body.

Titane delves into the life of Alexia, a young woman who endured a traumatic car accident during her childhood. This incident appears to have laid the foundation for her violent nature and her sexual interest in cars, as her monstrous tendencies have been evident since her youth. The film portrays Alexia as ruthlessly violent, inflicting harm upon others. However, a shift occurs in the second half of the film, as Alexia assumes the identity of Adrien Legrand, a 17-year-old missing boy and the son of a troubled firefighter named Vincent Legrand. From this point onward, the narrative centres on the intertwined lives of Vincent and Alexia (now Adrien), diverging from Alexia's earlier depiction of violence.

The film belongs to the New French Extremism genre, characterized by its explicit portrayal of violence. This genre has experienced rapid growth in the past decade, encompassing French films

¹ James Mottram, "Why *Titane*, Julia Ducournau's 2021 Cannes Palme d'Or winner, may be the most extreme movie you'll see all year," *South China Morning Post*, January 4, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3161913/why-titane-julia-ducournaus-2021-cannes-palme-dor-winner>.

² Robert Moran, "It has film festival audiences fainting in the aisles. But how bad is *Titane*?" *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 8, 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/movies/it-has-film-festival-audiences-fainting-in-the-aisles-but-how-bad-is-titane-20211108-p596ud.html>

³ Sasha Geffen, "Titane Proves No One Has A Body," *Them*, January 3, 2022, <https://www.them.us/story/titane-heartwarming-trans-slasher-film-julia-ducournau>

⁴ Jude Drye, "Cross Dressing and Car Fetishes: 'Titane' Twists Trans Tropes Into Perverse, Lifeless Body Horror," *IndieWire*, October 2, 2021, <https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/titane-body-horror-trans-phobic-1234668724/>.

that focus on graphic depictions of sex, violence, and torture.⁵ Maddi McGillvray argues that these types of films can elicit strong reactions from audiences, often including theatre walkouts and audience members fainting.⁶ While films within this genre are often criticized for sensationalizing (sexual) violence, McGillvray argues that critics sometimes overlook the broader themes addressed by these films, particularly concerning gender representation.⁷ My research on a New French Extremism film like *Titane* is relevant as it sheds light on the connections between violence and broader societal issues, including gender representation and bodily transformations. Analysing *Titane* within this context offers insights into the interplay of cinematic depictions of violence and the portrayal of the monstrous feminine. Furthermore, analysing *Titane* beyond its mere presentation of violence and gore holds relevance to illustrate the film's capacity to affect viewers in diverse ways, while also providing commentary on broader societal themes.

My research on *Titane* delves into both representation and viewer affect. Given that the concept of the monstrous feminine dates back to the early 90s, I offer a more contemporary approach by combining it with viewer affect. This approach highlights how Alexia is represented as a monstrous feminine figure who is able to subvert stereotypes and norms surrounding gender identity and the female body and how this affects the viewer. Affect is especially relevant for study as existing academic research on *Titane* and studies on the monstrous feminine often prioritize questions of representation over viewer affect. Barbara Creed, who coined the term monstrous feminine, has frequently faced criticism for her reliance on psychoanalysis in conceptualizing the notion of the monstrous feminine. For example, Anna Powell argues that Creed's psychoanalytical approach excessively emphasizes narrative elements at the expense of affect.⁸ Similarly, Patricia Pisters stresses the significance of the emotions evoked by a film that incorporates the monstrous feminine, rather than its specific narrative meaning.⁹ In my thesis, I address these critiques put forth by Powell and Pisters by integrating representation and psychoanalytical concepts with viewer affect. By incorporating these perspectives, my research enriches the understanding of the monstrous feminine beyond a solely psychoanalytical framework and offers deeper insights into this concept beyond stereotypical norms.

The emphasis on both affect and representation guides my analysis toward two main aspects: firstly, examining the portrayal of Alexia as a monstrous feminine figure in relation to her evolving body and gender identity, and secondly, investigating how these representations affect viewers through somatic and bodily responses. This leads to my research question: "In what ways does *Titane* (2021)

⁵ Maddi McGillvray, "It's So Easy to Create a Victim: Subverting Gender Stereotypes in the New French Extremity," in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film* (Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 8.

⁶ McGillvray, "It's So Easy to Create a Victim: Subverting Gender Stereotypes in the New French Extremity," 8.

⁷ *Idem*," 9-10.

⁸ Anna Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2005), 2.

⁹ Patricia Pisters, *The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working with Deleuze in Film Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 52.

represent Alexia as a monstrous feminine figure, and what affect does this representation have on the viewer's embodied experience?" The sub-questions are:

- How does Alexia's monstrous femininity intertwine with transformation regarding her body and gender identity?
- How does Alexia's depiction as a monstrous feminine character convey agency and empowerment in defining her gender identity and bodily representation?
- How do oscillations in cinematic emotions of the viewer deepen the complexity of Alexia's portrayal as a monstrous feminine figure?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The monstrous feminine

The concept of the monstrous feminine originates from the work of Barbara Creed, notably explored in her book *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*.¹⁰ In her book, written in 1993, Creed examines how horror films have the ability to depict women as monstrous figures. Often, these depictions of monstrous feminine figures rest on stereotypes, such as the possessed woman, vampire, *femme castratrice*, the monstrous womb, or the woman as a witch.¹¹ Creed explains that the monstrous feminine figure frequently emerges at borders, such as those between the human and inhuman, good and evil, and those who conform to traditional gender roles and those who do not.¹² Because Creed's original writings on the monstrous feminine date from the mid-90s, it is important to expand on more recent configurations of the monstrous feminine. In her article "Exploring Mutilation: Women, Affect, and the Body Horror Genre," written in 2022, Carina Stopenski delves deeper into how viewers perceive representations of the monstrous feminine.¹³ She suggests that when women take on violent and monstrous roles instead of men, it adds layers of complexity to viewers' emotions. When a woman assumes a violent and monstrous role in a horror story, it compels viewers to reassess their assumptions about gender dynamics, power structures, and representation.¹⁴

The portrayal of the monstrous feminine has evolved significantly in recent years, moving beyond stereotypes to encompass more nuanced representations. In an interview with Nicholas Chare in the book *Re-Reading the Monstrous Feminine*, written in 2019, Creed revisits her earlier concept of the monstrous feminine and argues that stereotypical representations of this figure have been effectively changed over the years. She attributes this change to the increasing presence of women

¹⁰ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1-178.

¹¹ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 7.

¹² Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 11.

¹³ Carina Stopenski, "Exploring Mutilation: Women, Affect, and the Body Horror Genre," *(Un)Common Horrors* 12, no. 2 (2022): 1-19.

¹⁴ Stopenski, "Exploring Mutilation: Women, Affect, and the Body Horror Genre," 6.

filmmakers in the horror genre and the evolving nature of the genre itself.¹⁵ In Creed's later work, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, written in 2022, she delves into modern examples of the monstrous feminine, emphasizing its role in challenging gender norms and pushing boundaries. She argues how a growing number of films address issues related to gender norms, labelling them as feminist new-wave cinema.¹⁶ Directed primarily by women and often featuring a female protagonist, these films challenge patriarchal notions of womanhood, presenting the monstrous feminine figure as an empowering and transformative figure instead of seeing monstrosity as inherently negative.¹⁷

2.2 The abject

The monstrous feminine is closely linked with the concept of the abject, a concept frequently depicted in horror films through images of bodily waste, corpses, murder, decay, and human sacrifices.¹⁸ While Creed offers a clear explanation of the abject, it is Julia Kristeva's essay *Powers of Horror*, written in 1980, that initially sheds light on this concept. Kristeva argues that the abject: "Disrupts identity, system, order. [That] what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."¹⁹ Creed delves further into these borders, suggesting that horror films often construct a boundary between the abject body, the clean body, or between human and inhuman.²⁰ In later work on the abject, dating from 1997, Isabel Cristina Pinedo expands on the idea of binaries and borders in her book "Recreational Terror, Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing," positing that the monster's body blurs binary distinctions, which has the potential to dismantle differences (me/not me, human/nonhuman) and is often unsettling.²¹

The concept of the abject is especially useful in uncovering the roots of dehumanization in society, revealing why certain lives may be perceived as less valuable or even wasteful. Here, it is relevant to look at some more recent writings on the abject. According to Xavier Aldana Reyes in his article "Abjection and Body Horror," written in 2020, societal and historical norms dictate what is considered monstrous or disgusting, with the abject body being completely disconnected from humanity, existing beyond the boundaries of normalcy.²² Bodies simply recognized as "other" or different (inhuman) may still be part of society, whereas an abject (nonhuman) body is denied full acceptance. Stopenski further writes about these abject nonhumans, and argues that they are: "[...] Something that has been cast off from humanity entirely rather than one integrated into humanity but

¹⁵ Nicholas Chare, Jeanette Hoorn, and Audrey Yue, ed., *Re-Reading The Monstrous Feminine, Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 103.

¹⁶ Barbara Creed, *Return of the Monstrous Feminine. Feminist New Wave Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 1-2.

¹⁷ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous Feminine. Feminist New Wave Cinema*, 2.

¹⁸ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 9.

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University, 1982), 4.

²⁰ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 11.

²¹ Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (New York: SUNY Press, 1997), 21.

²² Xavier Aldana Reyes, "Abjection and Body Horror," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. Clive Bloom (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 395.

without the ability to recognize their Otheredness.”²³ In other words, the abject body exists outside of the boundaries of normalcy and is excluded from the realm of the human, as opposed to inhuman individuals who are still part of society.

The abject is often associated with the feminine monstrous body, with women frequently linked to abject elements such as bloodshed, menstruation, and other types of bodily waste.²⁴ Creed specifically highlights the womb as monstrously abject, arguing that this is due to its association with new life and its ability to evoke images of abjectness such as faeces, blood, and afterbirth.²⁵ Moreover, Creed argues that the loss of boundaries during pregnancy and childbirth accentuates the monstrous and abject representation of women, portraying the female body as no longer clean and intact but rather as a body that can open and rupture at any moment.²⁶

2.3. Womanliness as masquerade

Related to the monstrous feminine is the concept of womanliness as masquerade. Joan Riviere was the first, in 1929, to propose that womanliness could be worn like a mask, often referring to intellectual women who conceal their possession of masculine characteristics.²⁷ In her essay “Womanliness as a Masquerade”, Riviere illustrates the cases of three intellectual American women who adopt the mask of womanliness to hide their masculine desires, fearing the implications if they were to express masculine desires in front of men. Riviere mentions:

“Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it – much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods.”²⁸

Where Riviere discusses masquerades concerning the actual world, the concept can also be analysed in relation to horror films and the monstrous feminine. In the book *The Re-Reading of the Monstrous Feminine*, Chare et al. explore this link between the monstrous feminine and masquerades. They argue that the concept is relevant because it helps us understand why the monstrous feminine remains significant in films, especially today as gender roles are constantly being questioned.²⁹ Chare et al. argue that womanliness as a masquerade can be viewed in two ways. Firstly, as the adoption of a feminine appearance, as a sort of submission to patriarchal norms and expectations of femininity. Secondly, masquerade can also be seen as a form of empowerment, including for instance adopting a masculine appearance to navigate in spaces that might otherwise be restricted based on gender.³⁰ In

²³ Stopenski, “Exploring Mutilation: Women, Affect, and the Body Horror Genre,” 5.

²⁴ Stopenski, “Exploring Mutilation: Women, Affect, and the Body Horror Genre,” 4.

²⁵ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 49-51.

²⁶ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 58.

²⁷ Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 9, no. 29 (1929): 176.

²⁸ Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” 176.

²⁹ Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, *Re-Reading The Monstrous Feminine, Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, 26.

³⁰ Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, *Re-Reading The Monstrous Feminine, Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, 26.

this interpretation, womanliness as a masquerade is seen as a means of challenging (sometimes strategically) traditional gender roles. In both cases, masquerade offers the ability for greater freedom.³¹

Womanliness as a masquerade closely relates to the monstrous feminine and the abject. Chare et al. argue that the monstrous feminine figure often conceals abject elements surrounding her identity by displaying a form of femininity that is seen as acceptable.³² Amanda Howell and Lucy Baker explain more about masquerades in their book *Monstrous Possibilities, The Female Monster in 21st Century Screen Horror*; published in 2022, and argue: “An abject figure, she may perform or invoke stereotypical femininity, but it doesn’t fit her. It is, quite literally, a drag.”³³ In other words, the abject woman is depicted as trying to conform to societal expectations of femininity, but this portrayal fails to capture her true essence. Howell and Baker argue that womanliness as a masquerade is not only meant to conceal masculinity, but it can also function as a way to conceal monstrously abject bodies by acting more humanly.³⁴ By doing so, a woman’s identity can be multiple, where the masquerade can cover both unexpressed desires and monstrous rage. It is when the veil of masquerade drops that the real persona resurfaces and the monstrousness becomes clear.

2.4 Cinematic emotions: dread, terror, and somatic empathy

2.4.1. Cinematic dread

One of the most prominent works on cinematic emotions is by Julian Hanich, who gives a rich understanding of cinematic emotions in his book “Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear,” published in 2010.³⁵ Hanich delves into the cinematic emotion of dread in his book, explaining that cinematic dread embodies an anticipatory and silent yet profoundly intense form of cinematic fear. The stillness and slowness of cinematic dread can be evoked through various techniques and elements, such as minimal camera movements, prolonged shots, and unsettling music.³⁶ Central to the emotion of dread is a split intentionality. Hanich argues that within moments of dread, a split occurs within someone’s consciousness, dividing the viewers’ focus into two. On one hand, viewers are immersed in the subjective experience, fearing a confrontation with the (monstrous or evil) figure on the screen. On the other hand, viewers are aware

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Idem, 26-27.

³³ Howell and Baker, *Monstrous Possibilities. The Female Monster in 21st Century Screen Horror*, 6.

³⁴ Howell and Baker, *Monstrous Possibilities. The Female Monster in 21st Century Screen Horror*, 6-7.

³⁵ Julian Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1-293.

³⁶ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 156.

of the larger picture and fear for the characters on screen.³⁷ This split enriches the experience of dread, distinguishing it from emotions like disgust, terror, or shock.³⁸

Cinematic dread is further explained by Matthias de Bondt in his article “The Emotion of Dread in Cinematic Horror”, published in 2023. De Bondt argues that fundamental to the emotion of dread is its anticipatory nature. He posits that tension arises from the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of a narrative.³⁹ De Bondt contends that dread primarily focuses on a confrontation with the monstrous, however, what the monstrous entails is at times unknown to the viewer.⁴⁰ Although horror films most often incorporate scenes and moments of dread, the intensity may vary.⁴¹ Some films sustain a lasting sense of dread throughout the whole film, which gives the ability to build dread much earlier in the film. However, this does not mean that such a film reveals more when dread is introduced earlier on. De Bondt argues that films including dread rarely reveal everything. Instead, they deliberately withhold key information and details. This leads to the viewers being left in a state of uncertainty, as dread continues as a sort of lingering emotion.⁴²

2.4.2. Direct horror

Direct horror differentiates from dread in the way that the viewer is directly confronted with intense and lively images of violent or monstrous creatures.⁴³ However, it is not merely enough for these elements to be shown, they must also be threatening to the viewer in order for direct horror to emerge.⁴⁴ Hanich outlines two strategies to intensify direct horror: firstly, representing the victim as a character with whom viewers have developed a strong allegiance, such as an attractive, innocent, or sympathetic character. Secondly, horror can be intensified through the combination of cruelty and immorality, requiring the monster or violent event to be immoral and threatening. This allows viewers to judge the actions of the monstrous figure or violent event.⁴⁵

Achieving direct horror involves a combination of narrative, content, and aesthetics working together, evoked through techniques like close-up shots, loud sounds, music, and special effects.⁴⁶ Direct horror operates differently than cinematic emotions such as terror and dread. While dread and terror focus on uncertainty about the present or future outcome of a scene, direct horror presents more known intentions.⁴⁷ The future plays a minimal role in direct horror, as viewers are horrified by what is

³⁷ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 158-159.

³⁸ De Bondt, “The Emotion of Dread in Cinematic Horror,” 46.

³⁹ De Bondt, “The Emotion of Dread in Cinematic Horror,” 46.

⁴⁰ Idem, 58.

⁴¹ Idem, 47.

⁴² De Bondt, “The Emotion of Dread in Cinematic Horror,” 58-59.

⁴³ Idem, 82.

⁴⁴ Idem, 84.

⁴⁵ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 83-84.

⁴⁶ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 84.

⁴⁷ Idem, 82-83.

happening in the present moment. Unlike dread, where the monstrous being or threatening event remains somewhat vague or unknown, direct horror presents them in full glory.⁴⁸

Pleasure plays a significant role in direct horror, as viewers frequently oscillate between feelings of fascination and fright. Hanich argues that there are always two elements at play: “The viewer is involved in a balancing act between the luring pull towards the frightening object of fascination and the threatening push away from the fascinating object of fright.”⁴⁹ As the frightening aspect intensifies, the initial enjoyment diminishes, transforming pleasurable fear into distressing fear.⁵⁰ Direct horror offers a pleasurable type of fear that draws viewers in, captivating and immersing us in the film world. However, a breakdown of distance can also occur, resulting in the opposite of immersion. For example, when fear and horror become overwhelming, viewers may raise their hands in front of their eyes, temporarily disengaging from the film world.⁵¹

2.4.3. Somatic empathy

A different type of cinematic emotion from terror and dread is somatic empathy, which involves bodily responses to what is depicted on screen. Hanich argues: “Somatic empathy is a form of *Einfühlung* that describes more or less automatic, but no more than partial parallelism between a character’s and my own body’s sensations, affects, or emotions.”⁵² While viewers do not physically experience the pain depicted on screen, there is still an intense and vague sensation that is evoked by such scenes.⁵³ Xavier Aldana Reyes, in his book *Horror Film and Affect*, published in 2016, suggests that if pain is possible, it is only because it is imagined, projected, and then interpreted and re-appropriated by the viewers’ bodies.⁵⁴ Somatic empathy has an involuntary nature: one cannot avoid it because it involves reflex-like and very sudden responses. This nature makes it both effective and disliked by viewers, as one can imagine that it is not always a welcome cinematic emotion.⁵⁵

Somatic empathy encompasses three elements: sensation mimicry, motor mimicry, and affective mimicry. Firstly, sensation mimicry involves viewers’ involuntary replication of similar sensations experienced by the character on screen.⁵⁶ As a result, somatic empathy heightens our awareness of our bodies and through sensation mimicry viewers can “feel” certain sensations when watching painful scenes.⁵⁷ Secondly, motor mimicry entails mimicking the specific muscular actions of characters observed on the screen. For instance, when closely following on-screen actions, viewers

⁴⁸ Idem, 82.

⁴⁹ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 82.

⁵⁰ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 83.

⁵¹ Idem, 99-100.

⁵² Idem, 103-104.

⁵³ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 104.

⁵⁴ Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect. Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 176.

⁵⁵ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 105.

⁵⁶ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 182.

⁵⁷ Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect. Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership*, 173.

might tense up and mirror the character's muscular movements.⁵⁸ Motor mimicry often occurs during scenes of dread, such as mimicking tense breathing or body postures.⁵⁹ Thirdly, affective motor mimicry involves mimicking the emotions or affects expressed by characters. It is not so much about the physical body but is more focused on replicating someone's expression. For example, mimicking a fearful face might actually induce fear or heighten suspense.⁶⁰

3. Method

3.1. Explanation of scenes

Before delving into the method, it is relevant to reflect on the specific scenes chosen for the analysis of *Titane*. The primary focus of the analysis will be on three specific scenes. These three scenes are selected based on their relevance to the research question and sub-questions, as well as their applicability to various theoretical concepts. Special emphasis is placed on the portrayal of the monstrous feminine in these scenes, as the chosen scenes chronologically portray the progression and transition of Alexia's monstrosity in the film. The first scene (at 04:47 minutes) marks Alexia's first appearance as an adult character in the film, where she is seen performing at a car show. The scene is chosen for its depiction of Alexia's womanliness, especially in relation to her monstrous nature and gender identity. In the second scene (at 22:47 minutes), Alexia is seen taking a pregnancy test at her co-worker's house. After attempting to abort the baby, she ends up brutally murdering her co-worker and others in the house. This scene is selected because the moment of attempted abortion contrasts with the moment of the murders and evokes different types of emotional responses from the viewer, each portraying a different image of Alexia. Lastly, the third scene (at 32:01 minutes) portrays Alexia's transformation as she takes on the identity of Adrien. Here, she modifies her appearance in the bathroom of a train station, resorting to self-mutilation to mimic Adrien's appearance. This scene is chosen because it offers further insights into the fluidity of Alexia's gender identity and the relationship between self-mutilation and the skin in her process of bodily transformation.

3.2 Phenomenology and film

To effectively analyse the three scenes in the thesis, I adopt a phenomenological framework as a method. Phenomenology encompasses various interpretations across disciplines and can be challenging to define precisely.⁶¹ In the context of my thesis, however, I integrate film phenomenology. Julian Hanich and Christian Ferencz-Flatz describe film phenomenology as: "An attempt that describes invariant structures of the film viewer's lived experience when watching

⁵⁸ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 182.

⁵⁹ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 182.

⁶⁰ Ibidem.

⁶¹ Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich, "Editors' Introduction: What is Film Phenomenology?" *Studia Phaenomenologica* 16 (2016): 12.

moving images in a cinema or elsewhere. Here, the emphasis can lie on the film as an intentional object or the viewer as experiencing subject.”⁶² Thus, film phenomenology aims to reveal aspects of viewer’s experiences when watching films, focusing on either the film itself or the viewer’s perspective. As a method, phenomenology is not concerned with measurements or specific audience opinions.⁶³ As Hanich explains: “The question is rather: if a viewer is affected by horror, shock, dread or terror scenes, how does he or she experience it?”⁶⁴ Therefore, specific audience reactions are not deemed relevant.⁶⁵ This is also where a specific limitation of phenomenology comes into play: Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich argue that because phenomenology cannot account for all experiences, it often becomes too unspecific and general, as it tends to view the viewer as a universal entity.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, phenomenology remains a relevant method, as describing experiences can significantly enhance our understanding of film.⁶⁷

Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich argue that film and phenomenology as a combination have not always been popular.⁶⁸ Since the 1990s, however, phenomenology resurged as a method, largely attributed to the "somatic turn." This turn points to the shift in the humanities towards acknowledging bodily and emotional experience and has significantly influenced film theory.⁶⁹ The significance of the bodily experience when watching films is highlighted by Vivian Sobchack. According to Sobchack, watching a film entails "watching" with the entire body, not just the eyes. It is an active immersion of all the senses, transforming film-watching from a passive to an active engagement.⁷⁰

3.3. Phenomenology and affect

Phenomenology is inherently connected to affect, which refers to bodily reactions triggered when external stimuli influence an individual. Carl Plantinga argues in *Moving Viewers. American Film and Spectator’s Experience* that affect functions as an umbrella term, encompassing somatic and bodily responses but also emotions and moods.⁷¹ He contends that affect has often been overlooked, particularly in screen theory, where emphasis has been placed on psychoanalysis while emotions have been sidelined in favour of logical and critical thinking. Plantinga argues that emotions and affect have often been considered private and subjective, thus not always deemed suitable for academic study.⁷² Plantinga critiques this perspective and instead argues that emotions are central and fundamental

⁶² Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich, “Editors’ Introduction: What is Film Phenomenology?” 13-14.

⁶³ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 40-41.

⁶⁴ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 40.

⁶⁵ Idem, 40-43.

⁶⁶ Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich, “Editors’ Introduction: What is Film Phenomenology?” 48-49.

⁶⁷ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 44-47.

⁶⁸ Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich, “Editors’ Introduction: What is Film Phenomenology?” 14.

⁶⁹ Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich, “Editors’ Introduction: What is Film Phenomenology?” 38.

⁷⁰ Vivian Sobchack, “Embodying transcendence: on the literal, the material, and the cinematic sublime,” *Material Religion* 4, no. 2 (2008): 196-197.

⁷¹ Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers. American Film and Spectator’s Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 95.

⁷² Plantinga, *Moving Viewers. American Film and Spectator’s Experience*, 4-5.

elements in filmic experiences, contributing to a film's artistic power and influence, and therefore worthy of scholarly study.⁷³ Plantinga explains more on how affect and emotion can operate in films, and argues that it can enhance a narrative, make it more exciting, vibrating, or even evoke feelings of disgust and sadness, thereby shaping the viewer's perception.⁷⁴ Reyes delves deeper into the connection between affect and narrative, and argues that affect can be analysed beyond cinematic elements and techniques. He argues that certain atmospheres depicted on screen are also influenced by the narrative itself, particularly in how they affect the viewer.⁷⁵ Therefore, an analysis of affect should encompass all elements that could potentially influence the viewer's perception of film or specific scenes, including cinematic techniques, narrative, and representation.⁷⁶ This approach of phenomenology aligns with the aim of my thesis, where I do not only analyse cinematic techniques but also narrative elements and representation to examine the affect of Alexia's monstrous representation in relation to the viewer. In this way, I adopt a more inclusive and holistic approach to affect and phenomenology, moving beyond a narrow focus solely on cinematic techniques.

4. Analysis

The analysis is divided into three chapters, with each chapter covering one of the three scenes described in the method section. The scenes are discussed chronologically, focusing on both representation and affect in relation to Alexia. In my method section, I elaborate on how phenomenology is a descriptive method; therefore, when discussing cinematic emotions and affect in my analysis, I provide more detailed descriptions. However, when analysing Alexia in relation to concepts such as the monstrous feminine and the abject, the analysis will be less descriptive and more focused on the implications of this representation and how it relates to broader societal themes.

4.1. First scene: Alexia's car performance

4.1.1. Womanliness as a masquerade

While *Titane* centres around its protagonist Alexia as a violent, destructive, and monstrous figure, her monstrous nature is not immediately apparent from the film's beginning. Instead, it remains somewhat concealed beneath her feminine appearance. Firstly, it is relevant to contextualize the specific scene. In this scene, we see Alexia entering a building hosting a car show. As she navigates the space, the viewers are offered a glimpse into the car show's atmosphere, where women dance sensually on cars in a dimly lit room, while male spectators observe. Eventually, Alexia takes centre stage, wearing black lipstick, heavy eyeliner, and a leather outfit, and delivers her own performance.

⁷³ Ibidem.

⁷⁴ Plantinga, *Moving Viewers. American Film and Spectator's Experience*, 5-6.

⁷⁵ Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect. Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership*, 7-8.

⁷⁶ Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect. Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership*, 7-8.

Alexia's femininity in this scene can be analysed in relation to Riviere's notion of womanliness as a masquerade. As explained in the theoretical framework, the concept points to the deliberate adoption of a feminine mask in order to hide masculine traits, serving as a defence mechanism to cope with internal conflicts and external pressures related to gender roles.⁷⁷ Figen Berk, in her article "The Necessity of Masquerade: Femininity in Joan Riviere and Nella Larsen," argues that women often use the masquerade to their advantage, strategically playing along with stereotypes rather than accepting them. This enables them to thrive in a society that may not fully accept who they are.⁷⁸ In *Titane*, Alexia's usage of womanliness as a masquerade is a way of conforming to expected femininity. Her exaggerated movements, seductive expressions, and provocative clothing during her car performance are all carefully orchestrated to captivate male attention, masking her monstrous identity and unconventional desires related to cars without raising suspicion. By conforming to the expectations of femininity set by the men at the car show—sensual and sexual—she conceals her monstrous identity and finds arousal in her interactions with the cars. Meanwhile, the male spectators believe it to be part of the performance rather than reality. Thus, Alexia's usage of masquerade is more nuanced than a passive survival strategy to thrive in society. Her portrayal of womanliness is not merely to survive or to entertain the male onlookers but rather about asserting agency over her body and sexual desires, manipulating the situation to her advantage. Alexia acts and looks feminine not out of obligation, but rather as a calculated manoeuvre to strategically deceive the male onlookers.

Alexia's portrayal of femininity is multifaceted, serving both as a disguise of her monstrous nature and as a performance characterized by exaggerated and artificial elements. This portrayal resonates with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender is not an inherent trait but rather a series of actions and behaviours one engages in.⁷⁹ Alexia actively performs gender through her movements, expression, and appearance. For example, her movements are exaggerated and bordering on provocative as she repeatedly grinds on the car, emphasizing the sensuality and sexuality of her performance. Her appearance also reinforces her performative femininity, with heavy makeup and a leather-look outfit contributing to the exaggeratedness of her femininity (see figure 1).

⁷⁷ Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," 175-177.

⁷⁸ Figen Berk, "The Necessity of Masquerade: Femininity in Joan Riviere and Nella Larsen," *European Academic Research* 11, no. 5 (August 2014): 6189.

⁷⁹ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-521.



Figure 1: Alexia's performance

Here, Butler's theory challenges Riviere's notion of womanliness as a capacity. While Riviere implies that womanliness is an inherent trait in women, Butler instead highlights the constructed and performative nature of gender identity.⁸⁰ In *Titane*, Alexia's performance of femininity serves as a poignant example of how gender is enacted and performed rather than being an innate or fixed characteristic in a woman. In conclusion, the portrayal of femininity as a masquerade and performance to conceal Alexia's monstrousness sets the tone for her character journey. It illustrates that femininity is not an inherent trait for Alexia but rather a deliberate and strategic choice aimed at asserting power and agency. By this, the scene introduces the theme of disguise, inviting viewers to continually question Alexia's true identity – whether she is a man, a woman, a monster, or a combination.

4.2 Second scene: from attempted abortion to murder

4.2.1. Alexia's relation to the abject

In this section of the analysis, I aim to delve deeper into a scene that portrays Alexia's monstrosity in its full glory, rather than hidden beneath the surface. The scene I discuss opens with Alexia finding out she is pregnant at the house of her co-worker Justine. Anxiously holding the pregnancy test, Alexia removes a sharp hairpin from her hair and inserts it into her vagina, grimacing in pain as she attempts to abort the baby. The portrayal of the attempted abortion can be closely linked to the concept of the abject, especially in relation to Alexia as a woman. Creed argues that women are often associated with the abject, particularly through their wombs, which society views as horrifying and disgusting.⁸¹ In *Titane*, the abject elements include, for instance, the act of trying to abort the baby with a hairpin, followed by a depiction of black blood on a piece of toilet paper (see figure 2).

⁸⁰ Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," 176-179.

⁸¹ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 51.



Figure 2: Black blood after Alexia's attempted abortion

Applying the concept of the abject to Alexia's attempted abortion reveals a complexity that goes beyond a literal interpretation of the concept. Not only does Alexia's gender fluidity complicate the concept of the abject in relation to the maternal, her agency also challenges the idea of the maternal always lacking agency. Here, I draw on Imogen Tyler's critique of the abject in her essay "Against Abjection."⁸² Tyler critiques Kristeva's usage of the abject, arguing that her theory is: "[...] founded on the premise that the maternal cannot be, cannot speak, and cannot take up a subject position."⁸³ However, Alexia is portrayed differently in the film, occupying an active position. In *Titane*, Alexia is placed at the forefront of the abortion scene, demonstrating agency and power over her own body. This pattern is evident throughout the film, as I have previously argued that Alexia uses femininity as a masquerade to assert agency and power over her body. Regarding the abject, Alexia exercises agency by attempting to abort her baby not because she is disempowered or forced to, but because she is placed in a subject position and can make this decision for herself.

The abject elements depicted in the attempted abortion scene, such as the presence of black blood, serve a dual purpose beyond mere visual representation. The film also aims to convey a message about the state of motherhood in society through the representation of the abject in relation to Alexia's maternal body. One of the critiques presented by Tyler is that the abject status attributed to motherhood is not an unchangeable fact but rather a construct reinforced over time through societal

⁸² Imogen Tyler, "Against Abjection," *Feminist Theory* 10, no. 1 (2009): 77-98.

⁸³ Tyler, "Against Abjection," 86.

norms and beliefs.⁸⁴ Tyler pleads for a shift in focus towards understanding the impact of these beliefs and gaining insight into how motherhood is depicted in relation to the abject, along with its real-life implications.⁸⁵ While Alexia's body is portrayed as abject, it also reflects the lived reality of maternal experiences, conveying deeper commentary on the subject of pregnancy. Regarding the portrayal of pregnancy in *Titane*, Ducournau emphasizes that she wanted to foreground the idea that pregnancy is not always a blissful experience for women.⁸⁶ Her stance underscores the film's intention to offer a nuanced perspective on pregnancy, challenging the notion that motherhood should conform to a singular narrative. By centring Alexia as a woman with agency and autonomy over her own body, *Titane* serves a deeper purpose: it critiques society's tendency to idealize motherhood while stigmatizing those who diverge from traditional expectations. In doing so, the film addresses Tyler's critique of the abject maternal by exploring a more profound understanding of maternal representation and linking it to real-life experiences. Furthermore, the portrayal of pregnancy prompts viewers to reassess their preconceptions and biases, fostering greater acceptance and empathy for diverse expressions of womanhood and non-conforming gender identities.

The abortion scene can be analysed not only in terms of representation and a wider societal context but also on the level of viewer affect. Here, I revisit Reyes's critique of the abject, who argues that the concept does not fully explain why and how a scene evokes certain emotions. Reyes advocates for a broader understanding of the abject, focusing on its relation to the bodily experiences of the viewer.⁸⁷ In this context, I argue that the abortion scene in *Titane* sheds light on how the abject operates outside of psychoanalytical interpretations, emphasizing viewer affect. The scene can be examined through the concept of somatic empathy, as described by Hanich, which creates a parallelism between the emotions of viewers and those of the character on screen.⁸⁸ Observing the moment Alexia inserts the stick into her vagina may trigger certain sensations in the viewer's body. It is relevant to note that this does not entail feeling the exact pains and emotions of the character on screen, as this is physically impossible.⁸⁹ However, viewers may feel tingling sensations in specific body areas while witnessing Alexia's attempted abortion. Additionally, a form of mimicry involves replicating expressions and emotions, known as motor mimicry.⁹⁰ Motor mimicry may occur as viewers mimic Alexia's actions, such as letting out muffled screams when Alexia screams on screen or squirming in their seats as Alexia squirms on the toilet.

⁸⁴ Tyler, "Against Abjection," 95.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶ Hannah Holway, "Julia Ducournau on her daring new film *Titane*, a visceral study of humanity's ugly complexities," HERO Magazine, January 3, 2022, <https://hero-magazine.com/article/201894/julia-ducournau-titane>

⁸⁷ Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect. Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership*, 45-46.

⁸⁸ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 103-104.

⁸⁹ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 104.

⁹⁰ *Idem*, 182.

Somatic empathy in relation to the abject in this scene aims not solely to frighten or shock the viewer or to identify with Alexia as a character, but rather to sympathize and empathize with Alexia via her body. This aligns with Reyes' argument that the focus should be on sympathizing with the character on screen rather than identifying with them.⁹¹ Because somatic empathy and sympathy are not exclusive to each other, viewers can experience both emotions.⁹² Despite finding a character repugnant, viewers can still sympathize with them based on their experiences.⁹³ In relation to *Titane*, viewers might have sympathy for Alexia not solely based on her personality but rather based on what her body goes through, fostering a connection with Alexia's struggles and emotions. Ducournau underscores the viewer's ability to connect with Alexia's body, acknowledging that identifying or sympathizing with Alexia's character might be challenging. Therefore, she deliberately sought an "umbilical cord" between the audience and Alexia's body to convey her experiences more effectively.⁹⁴ Through this type of sympathy with Alexia, viewers might perceive the monstrous feminine in a more nuanced light, rather than viewing Alexia solely as an evil figure for whom the viewer cannot feel sympathy. However, it is worth noting that feelings of sympathy may not always consistently arise in the film, especially as the attempted abortion scene is followed by a killing spree in Justine's house, which diminishes feelings of sympathy entirely. Therefore, the next paragraph focuses on the shift from somatic empathy to dread.

4.2.2. Affective shifts: cinematic dread

While the previous paragraph expands a bit on the viewer affect of Alexia's representation, I aim to delve deeper into viewer affect in this paragraph. Here, I shift the focus from Alexia's attempted abortion to another moment in the same scene: the instance where Alexia kills the occupants of her coworker's house. Following Alexia's attempted abortion, the scene's mood shifts, further developing into the portrayal of Alexia as a monstrous and violent figure. In this scene, Alexia and Justine are seen kissing on the couch. Although Justine briefly mentions Alexia's pregnancy, Alexia does not respond. As they continue to kiss, Justine rests her head on Alexia's upper body while Alexia strokes her hair. Justine looks up, smiling at Alexia, and Alexia abruptly removes a sharp stick from her hair, stabbing Justine in the face (see figure 3).

⁹¹ Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect. Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership*, 52.

⁹² Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 183.

⁹³ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 183-184.

⁹⁴ Mark Olsen, "Titane director Julia Ducournau explains how she crafted the year's wildest film," *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2021-10-05/titane-explained-julia-ducournau>



Figure 3: Depiction of cinematic dread

The tone of the scene here differs from the previous moment of the attempted abortion, as somatic empathy is replaced by a feeling of dread. In the moments preceding Alexia's attack on Justine, viewers experience specific emotional responses as the scene evokes a sense of dread before the onset of direct horror. Cinematic dread entails an anticipatory form of fear, where viewers anticipate that something will unfold between Alexia and Justine, yet the exact nature of the threat and its outcome remain uncertain.⁹⁵ Leading up to Alexia's attack, viewers primarily fear for Justine's character as they remain unaware of Alexia's intentions. This creates a split intentionality: viewers are immersed in anticipating the unfolding events, fearing both the confrontation between Justine and Alexia and the overarching realization of Alexia's monstrous nature, which heightens the fear for Justine's fate.⁹⁶

Cinematic dread is characterized by a sense of stillness and slowness, conveyed through various cinematic techniques.⁹⁷ In this scene, little occurs aside from Alexia stroking Justine's hair. There is minimal camera movement, with the focus on the two women in a medium close-up shot. Though the shot is brief, it feels prolonged due to temporal immersion: viewers anticipate where the narrative will lead, creating an expectation for what will happen next.⁹⁸ With minimal camera movement and a lack of significant sound, the shot feels longer than it actually is. The moment of dread in this scene is also marked by a sense of claustrophobia and heightened tension, especially concerning the setting in a house. Hanich argues that dread scenes often take place in enclosed spaces to intensify the atmospheric effect of a film.⁹⁹ The scene unfolds in the enclosed space of Justine's house, enhancing feelings of claustrophobia and entrapment by confining the characters in such a

⁹⁵ De Bondt, "The Emotion of Dread in Cinematic Horror," 46.

⁹⁶ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 158-159.

⁹⁷ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 156.

⁹⁸ *Idem*, 68.

⁹⁹ *Idem*, 172-173.

limited space. This amplifies the sense of unease and discomfort experienced by viewers, as they are made to feel as though they are trapped alongside Justine.

Dread is not exclusive to this scene, as the cinematic emotion of dread is present throughout the entire film. Consider the scene at the beginning where Alexia is approached by a male fan outside of her car; Alexia kisses him, but a sense of dread is present as viewers anticipate that something will happen, eventually leading to Alexia killing the man. As dread is present throughout multiple scenes in the film, it leads to a heightened sense of unease and anxiety for the viewer. The viewer is constantly on edge throughout the film, with tension constantly heightened by the use of cinematic emotions such as dread, followed by other emotions such as direct horror. Ultimately, the oscillation between different emotions keeps the viewer constantly emotionally invested and engaged with the unfolding narrative of the film.

4.2.3. From dread to direct horror: underscoring Alexia's monstrous nature

After Justine and Alexia are seen struggling and fighting, and Alexia has successfully killed Justine, Alexia continues her violent rampage, targeting others in the house. This moment in the scene illustrates that the cinematic emotion of dread is overtaken by another emotion: direct horror. Within direct horror, viewers often find a sense of pleasurable fear while watching the horrors on screen unfold, driven by curiosity about what will happen next. Hanich argues that the extent of this urge becomes apparent when filmmakers deliberately withhold elements from viewers, leaving them longing for more.¹⁰⁰ A specific moment that leaves the viewer longing for more is when Alexia and Justine fight on the couch. Intentionality plays a significant role here, as it is obvious to the viewer that Alexia is attempting to kill Justine with her hairpin. While the two women fight on the couch, the camera remains stationary, positioned from behind the furniture, particularly obscuring the action (see figure 4). This contrast between the static camera and the chaotic movement of the two women places the viewer in an observational role. Watching from behind the couch allows the viewer to only partially witness the violence unfold without seeing every detail. If it were possible, the viewer might want to peek over the couch, searching for better angles, to watch the horrors of the fight unfold in closer detail moment. This behaviour underscores the intensity of the urge to see and hear as much as possible, even when the horror is deliberately partly obscured from view.¹⁰¹ Due to the observational role instead of being close to the action (such as with close-up shots), there is a sense of helplessness of the viewer that accompanies the feelings of horror, evoked through the distancing effect of the wide shot.

¹⁰⁰ Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, 86.

¹⁰¹ *Idem*, 86-87.



Figure 4: Viewer being placed in an observational role

The horrors on screen are further intensified by the escalation of immorality and cruelty regarding Alexia's character. This can be exemplified by illustrating the moment after Alexia has just killed Justine and trails after Romain, another occupant in the house, who has just walked down the stairs (see figure 5). The camera tracks Alexia as she retrieves a fire poker, framing her from the waist down as she drags the poker along the ground. Upon confronting Romain, the camera pans to capture a medium close-up shot of Alexia and Romain from a low angle. The instant Alexia stabs Romain in the foot, the camera shifts downward to depict his injured foot. Romain collapses, and the shot is once again presented from a low angle, from Romain's perspective. Romain and Alexia struggle for the fire poker, eventually leading to Alexia grabbing a chair and impaling him in the head. Here, the camera angle remains low, providing repeated shots from Romain's point-of-view with Alexia towering over him. Overall, the abundance of low-angle, close-up, and point-of-view shots intensifies the sense of vulnerability, immersing the viewer directly into Romain's experience as he confronts the frightening situation, amplifying the feelings of helplessness he undergoes. Moreover, these techniques further emphasize Alexia as a monstrous figure by positioning her as larger and more dominant through the lower camera angles, imposing power and intimidation upon both Romain and the viewer. The strategic use of these cinematographic techniques further highlights the cruelty and immorality of Alexia's actions.

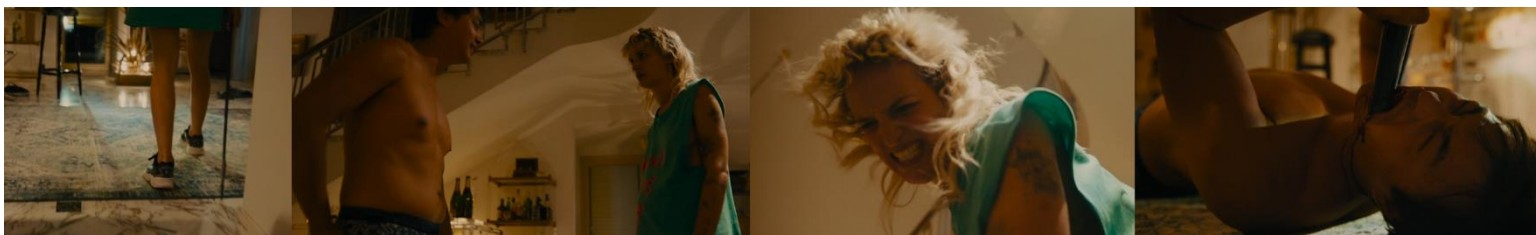


Figure 5: Sequence of Alexia attacking Romain

These moments where Alexia kills the occupants of the house can be challenging to viewers in terms of emotions. Whereas the viewer, at the moment of the attempted abortion, might have felt sympathy for Alexia and were connected to her body via somatic empathy, the moment of Alexia killing the occupants in the house instantly pulls the viewer back to a place of viewing Alexia as violent and monstrous. Her violent outbursts challenge what is deemed as “normal” in society, as Alexia’s pregnancy is deemed unwelcome, but she does not console Justine about her pregnancy or look emotional. Rather, Alexia is represented in extremes, and her act of random killings further distances her from normality. In an interview, Ducournau reflects on Alexia's violence, stating that she chose not to elaborate on why Alexia proceeded to randomly kill multiple people. She posits: “When women kill in movies, it’s very often linked to a cause that is explained. There is a justification. Men can be inherently violent for no reason, but for women it is utterly unacceptable.”¹⁰² Therefore, the absence of justification for Alexia’s monstrous and violent nature subverts the conventional expectations regarding violence in cinema and challenges the gender roles implied by violent films. By refraining from explaining Alexia’s violent actions, viewers are prompted to contemplate her monstrous nature. This keeps the viewers engaged and fosters ongoing speculation about whether she is merely a serial killer or if deeper motivations or personal struggles are driving her killing spree. Consequently, Alexia’s character becomes both repulsive and compelling, adding complexity to the narrative of the film.

4.3. Third scene: Alexia’s transformation into Adrien

4.3.1. Self-mutilation and the process of transformation

After murdering the occupants of Justine’s house, Alexia finds herself on the run. This part of the analysis shifts the focus from Alexia’s monstrous acts against others to her self-destructive behaviour. Before delving into the analysis, it is relevant to provide a brief overview of the scene. The scene begins with Alexia navigating through a train station, where she encounters a missing person poster featuring Adrien Legard, now 17 years old. Initially passing by the poster, Alexia pauses and retraces her steps to study it closely. Upon observing Adrien's missing person poster, she unexpectedly confronts her own wanted poster. This triggers an idea within her: to adopt the appearance of Adrien. Subsequently, Alexia enters a public restroom and deforms herself to look like Adrien: she breaks her nose and binds her belly in an attempt to hide her pregnant body.

Alexia undergoes a visible shift in demeanour to emulate that of Adrien. As previously discussed in this thesis, Alexia's fluidity in gender identity throughout the film implies the instability of gender itself. However, this instability extends beyond mere gender identity, encompassing the

¹⁰² Elaina Patten, “Titane director on film’s gender-bending themes and psychopathic violence,” NBC News, October 13, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-pop-culture/titane-director-films-gender-bending-themes-psychopathic-violence-rcna2932>.

instability of skin and flesh. Ruth McPhee argues in “Self-Mutilation and (a)signification” that the human body, particularly its skin and flesh, lacks a singular or fixed meaning.¹⁰³ Instead, it remains in a constant state of change, capable of transformation. Features such as tattoos, scars, or alterations serve to highlight this ongoing process of change, emphasizing the transformative potential inherent in skin and flesh.¹⁰⁴ In *Titane*, this theme of change and transformation is vividly portrayed through Alexia’s skin and flesh, which is continually depicted in a state of transformation, notably during her pregnancy. While bodily changes during pregnancy are common, the significance of the skin and flesh is heightened in *Titane* due to Alexia’s intentional modifications of her skin. In her efforts to resemble Adrien, she goes to lengths such as breaking her nose and binding her chest and belly to conceal her pregnant body (see figure 6).

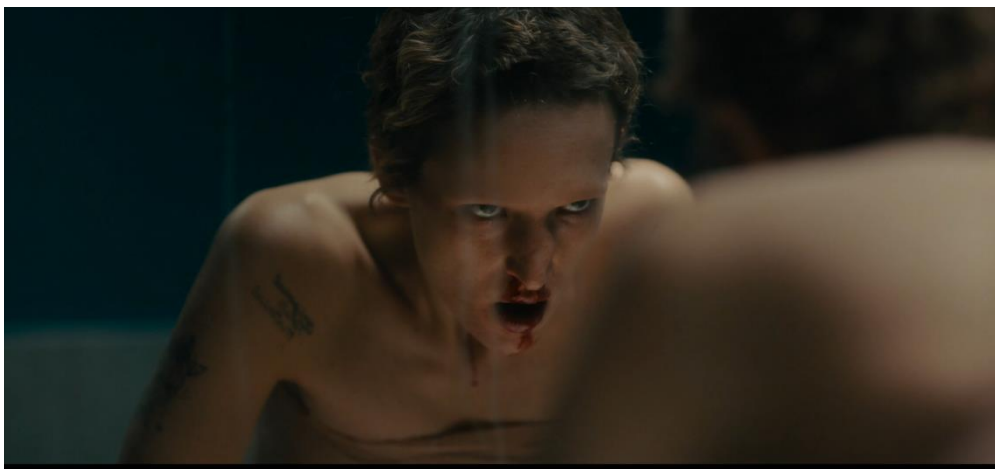


Figure 6: Alexia's deformities, transforming into Adrien

As the narrative unfolds, viewers witness the consequences of these alterations, manifesting in scars, blood, and bruises. As her pregnancy progresses, these changes and scars become more noticeable (see figure 7). These physical transformations emphasize the idea that the skin and flesh are always evolving and adapting. Additionally, the aftermath of these alterations, including scarring, bruising, and bleeding, emphasizes the delicate nature of Alexia’s skin. This suggests that her pursuit of identity and continuous transformation have physical consequences and take a toll on Alexia.

The scars and alterations on Alexia’s body not only highlight the process of transformation but also carry significant social implications. McPhee explains that the skin serves not only as a physical barrier but also as a canvas upon which societal meanings and identities are inscribed.¹⁰⁵ She argues that various markings such as tattoos and scars transform the skin into a site of encounter where notions of gender, race, and sexuality intersect and are communicated. The act of self-mutilation

¹⁰³ Ruth McPhee, “Self-Mutilation and (a)signification,” in *Female Masochism in Film. Sexuality, Ethics and Aesthetics* (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014), 96.

¹⁰⁴ McPhee, “Self-Mutilation and (a)signification,” 74-76.

¹⁰⁵ Idem, 96.

disrupts these societal norms and expectations inscribed on the skin, reconfiguring the system of meanings attached to flesh and skin and challenging established notions of identity and humanity.¹⁰⁶ Through altering her body via mutilation, the destabilization of Alexia's gender identity is further underscored. While Alexia is seen pregnant, her adoption of a masculine appearance including the binding of her belly, along with cuts and bruises, highlights the imbalance of her femininity, thus underscoring the intersections of her femininity and masculinity and the fluidity of her gender expression. The visible scars and bruises on her body, such as her broken nose, serve as constant reminders of her transformation, with her pregnant body becoming a site of tension and transformation throughout the film.



Figure 7: Alexia's abject body at a later stage in the film

4.3.2. Masculinity as a mask: transgressing gender boundaries

In the initial scene examined in this thesis, I posit that Alexia redefines the concept of womanliness as a masquerade by portraying femininity as a strategic choice, a mask worn for the sake of agency. However, in the subsequent scene depicting Alexia's transformation into Adrien, the notion of womanliness as a masquerade takes on a different form. Here, Alexia adopts masculinity as a disguise to evade authorities and embark on a new life with Vincent as her father figure. According to Chare et al., assuming a masculine masquerade often serves as a means of empowerment, granting individuals the freedom to navigate gender-restricted spaces.¹⁰⁷ For Alexia, adopting a male persona offers her autonomy and agency. Her masculine disguise provides her with a somewhat fresh start, symbolized structurally in the film: the first half portrays Alexia as a monstrous figure inflicting horrors upon others, while the latter half delves into a deeper emotional narrative centred on Alexia living as Adrien in Vincent's house. This marks a stark contrast between womanliness and manliness as a masquerade:

¹⁰⁶ Idem, 77.

¹⁰⁷ Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, *Re-Reading The Monstrous Feminine, Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, 26.

as a woman, she is depicted as more violent and ruthless, whereas as a man, her actions become less overtly monstrous. Although her monstrous tendencies remain latent, she refrains from extreme violence towards others, even when given the opportunity to harm Vincent in his sleep, indicating the transformative effect of her adoption of a masculine appearance. While Alexia appears more human when assuming a male persona, her body takes on a less human-like quality. As I previously argued, Alexia's body transforms due to her pregnancy, yet she attempts to suppress this aspect, resulting in bruising and bleeding. Despite her efforts to conceal her pregnant body, her pregnancy becomes increasingly visible throughout the film. Her bleeding and scarred body serves as a reminder of her monstrosity, even as her actions become less monstrous over time.

Despite Alexia's efforts to conform to masculine expectations by engaging in activities traditionally associated with men, such as becoming a firefighter, she still exhibits feminine traits. Alexia remains timid and often blends her feminine and masculine sides, as seen in the scene where she sensually dances on top of a fire truck while her male firefighter co-workers react with surprise and disgust (see figure 8).



Figure 8: Alexia's performance in front of the firemen

Here, gender as performative is vividly depicted as Alexia gives a literal performance of her femininity, highlighting that gender is something she can enact rather than fully embody. Thus, Alexia does not fully embrace her masculine side but instead combines elements of femininity and masculinity, further emphasizing the fluidity of her gender expression. As the film progresses, Alexia does not transition from a feminine to a masculine appearance but instead fluctuates between the two, embodying both femininity and masculinity simultaneously. In this context, the concept of the masquerade extends beyond Alexia's personal struggles to encompass broader societal norms and challenges regarding gender and identity. Claudia Lapping suggests in "Re-Reading Riviere's "Womanliness as a Masquerade": Putting Sex and the (trans) Body Back into Question" that the concept of the masquerade reflects not only individual struggles but also broader societal norms

regarding gender.¹⁰⁸ By portraying Alexia with both feminine and masculine characteristics, the film challenges binary notions of gender as strictly male or female. Through the multifaceted presentation of Alexia's gender identity, viewers are prompted to reconsider their preconceived notions about gender roles and embrace the complexity of human identity.

As previously proposed in this thesis, the portrayal of Alexia's various masquerades raises the question of whether she can be categorized as a man, woman, monster, or a blend of these identities. Many critics have critiqued the film's handling of Alexia's gender representation in *Titane*, with some arguing that it is transphobic and that Alexia is depicted as a transgender person without much depth or exploration of transgender experiences.¹⁰⁹ While one might acknowledge Alexia's portrayal as having some resemblance to a transgender person, I prefer to emphasize that Alexia's gender identity transcends conventional categorization. In an interview, Ducournau herself asserts that Alexia is intentionally depicted as not being confined to any specific gender, stating:

“While trying to question and debunk and subvert the gender stereotypes, I tried to also portray a world where there are more options, and we do not need to evolve in two gender, which are incredibly limiting [...] having a character that evolves beyond gender was absolutely normal.”¹¹⁰

This statement not only echoes my analysis of Alexia's shifting gender representation but also reinforces the deliberate choice to portray Alexia's gender as fluid and multifaceted. As there was no need to explain Alexia's gender identity, the film thus does not provide an explicit explanation of it. Ultimately, the beauty of the film lies in its ability to challenge gender norms and perceptions of normality. Instead of categorizing Alexia as strictly male, female, or transgender, the film presents her as a post-gender figure, embodying a spectrum of genders without being confined to a specific label. By leaving Alexia's gender identity open to interpretation, the film invites viewers to contemplate the complexity of human identity. In this way, *Titane* offers a profound exploration of gender, identity, and the human experience in relation to the body.

¹⁰⁸ Claudia Lapping, “Re-Reading Riviere’s “Womanliness as a Masquerade”: Putting Sex and the (trans) Body Back into Question,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Psychosocial Studies* (Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2022), 3-4.

¹⁰⁹ Mrs. Capricious, “Titane – Is It Transphobic? Let’s talk queer body horror,” Medium, January 11, 2022, <https://medium.com/prismnpn/titane-is-it-transphobic-4bda46bc6209>.

¹¹⁰ Patten, “Titane director on film’s gender-bending themes and psychopathic violence.”

5. Conclusion

This thesis offers insights into how Alexia is portrayed as a transformative figure in terms of her gender identity and body, and the profound impact of this representation on viewers' emotions. As illustrated in the introduction, *Titane* is a film that has not gone unnoticed in recent years. It won the Palme d'Or in 2021 and has garnered both negative and positive responses from critics. Online reviews and social media posts often focus on *Titane* as a film that shocks and horrifies audiences through its graphic portrayal of sex and violence, leading these aspects to become the most pervasive elements of the film. Through my analysis, I advocate for looking beyond solely horrifying gore and violence, aiming instead to draw attention to how gore and violence affect the viewer in different ways and how graphic elements in the film are deliberately employed to prompt reflection on broader themes of gender and the body.

Using the method of phenomenology, I delve deeper into the various emotions that arise when viewers watch *Titane*. My analysis of viewer affect illustrates the impact that body horror elements have on the viewer, showing the range of emotions experienced when confronted with the monstrous character of Alexia. Overall, the analysis reveals that viewers' emotions in relation to the film encompass more than those often mentioned in reviews and on social media, which typically concentrate solely on the horrifying aspects of the film. Instead, the emotions experienced by the viewer encompass a range of different oscillating emotions that not only focus on eliciting horror or fear but also manifest in various ways. For instance, there is a type of fear such as cinematic dread that operates on a quieter level than horror, or a more bodily response such as somatic empathy, which allows viewers to sympathize with Alexia's body.

In addition to viewer affect, it is relevant to reflect on the usage of psychoanalytical concepts in this thesis. The theories in this thesis are mostly older groundworks of psychoanalysis, such as the concept of the abject and the monstrous feminine. The basic principles of these theories help to understand the workings of the monstrous feminine figure. However, as Alexia transgresses stereotypical norms of the monstrous feminine and abject figure, the theories lend themselves to a more critical and nuanced application. Throughout the analysis, I offer a reinterpretation of the concepts by looking at them through a more modern and nuanced lens. For example, the theory of the monstrous feminine is reinterpreted to explore how this figure can also challenge gender norms instead of solely functioning as a stereotyped figure. Furthermore, the concept of womanliness as a masquerade is reinterpreted to illustrate how it can serve as a form of agency and empowerment, rather than merely functioning to please men. Additionally, my analysis also demonstrates that the adoption of a masquerade does not have to entail one of womanliness but can also entail that of manliness, broadening the understanding of how masquerades can fluctuate. Lastly, the concept of the abject is reinterpreted in this thesis by portraying that the abject figure of Alexia is not inherently devoid of agency and subjectivity; instead, throughout the analysis, it is shown how Alexia's scarred body reflects her agency and power, as it portrays her attempted abortion as a choice of her own. Through this modern and

nuanced application of psychoanalytical concepts, the analysis highlights the importance of adding depth to these theories. It demonstrates that while these concepts remain relevant in contemporary times, they can be employed in a more sophisticated manner, moving beyond mere repetition of theories.

The combination of both viewer affect and psychoanalytical concepts proves to be highly relevant for this thesis. As discussed in this thesis, both have their limitations and are subject to critique. While phenomenology has gained prominence as a method in recent years, it has often been sidelined due to the perception of emotions as subjective and irrelevant to academic study. Conversely, psychoanalysis has often been criticized for neglecting viewer affect. Thus, phenomenology and psychoanalytical concepts complement each other's "weaknesses". Here, the integration of psychoanalysis with phenomenology surpasses surface-level interpretations. The analysis portrays the importance of examining not only viewer affect but also psychoanalytical insights into how norms, beliefs, and values shape viewers' (bodily) engagements and reactions to the film. By examining how bodily sensations and emotions interact with cultural norms and values on gender and the body, a deeper understanding emerges of the complex interplay between the body of the viewer and the societal lens through which the viewer perceives themselves and others.

Thus, the combination of phenomenology and psychoanalytical concepts offers a comprehensive framework for understanding not only the affective impact of *Titane* on viewers but also its broader thematic and symbolic significance. Throughout my thesis, I illustrate that the viewer is not simply affected by the film but also forced to confront boundaries and binaries, such as gender binaries and boundaries between normal and abnormal bodies. *Titane* portrays these more graphically than most viewers are perhaps used to, inviting critical reflection on societal norms and values. By employing body horror elements, the film holds up a mirror to us as viewers, compelling us to confront our deepest discomforts regarding violence and the portrayal of changing, mutilated, and post-gender (maternal) bodies. In this way the film unveils to viewers elements that we may prefer to avoid – such as Alexia's attempted abortion and her abject mutilated body – compelling us to confront and reassess our norms and values.

The transformation that Alexia undergoes embodies a more contemporary approach than other types of films that incorporate a monstrous feminine figure. Here, Alexia's representation as a monstrous figure is more in tune with contemporary understandings of gender, reflecting on the possibilities and boundaries of gender and the body in the present and the future. Gender is represented as fluctuating, offering a glimpse of what society might look like when both gender and the body are viewed as constantly in motion. In this way, the film not only reflects on the representation of gender in our culture but also plays with them, offering a different viewpoint. In essence, my analysis emphasizes the significance of comprehending how viewers perceive a body horror film like *Titane* as shocking and horrifying, while also highlighting the necessity of exploring the deeper messages related to gender and the body conveyed through the films' body horror elements. A limitation of my research is that with phenomenology, I am unable to delve into specific viewer experiences. Therefore, for future research,

exploring differences in the impact and reception of Alexia's monstrous femininity among male, female, or non-binary viewers could be relevant. Such research could illuminate how scenes depicting Alexia's pregnancy and bodily transformations might be perceived differently depending on the individual.

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