

# Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Woman?: on the affective and queer potential of the monstrous-feminine in contemporary performance



*Figure 1. JEZEBEL by Cherish Menzo. Cherish Menzo. Photography by Bas de Brouwer.*

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MA Thesis | Utrecht University | June 20, 2022  
MA Contemporary Theatre, Dance and Dramaturgy | 2021-2022  
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## Abstract

This thesis demonstrates how the negatively considered stereotype of the monstrous-feminine holds an affective and queer potential in contemporary performance. The monstrous-feminine is a concept that has been established by film scholar Barbara Creed in the 1990s, analysing the portrayal of woman-as-monster in the horror film genre. Looking at abjection and sexuality, for which Creed has been informed by Julia Kristeva and Sigmund Freud, the monstrous-feminine is established as based on negative connotations of the feminine to sexuality, ambiguity, animality, and motherhood. In this research, I demonstrate that the monstrous-feminine is a stereotype that has its roots in patriarchal ideology, by which monstrous-femininity is considered horrifying, disgusting, and fearful. Balancing between version and subversion, this research emphasises the ambiguity of the monstrous figure – as simultaneously horrifying and fascinating – and proposes how this ambiguity creates a queer potential. Drawing on affect theory, in relation to the work of Sara Ahmed, and on queer studies, referring to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and José Esteban Muñoz, this thesis establishes how the monstrous-feminine holds an affective and queer potential when employed in performance. By drawing on these discourses, this thesis works to embrace the established association of emotions with women and looks for ways to employ the negative in a subversive way. Additionally, I provide a critique on the binary way of looking at the monstrous-feminine and, to organise this, I do not focus on the gender essentialist elements of monstrous-femininity but rather on how the monstrous-feminine might be employed in artistic contexts as a tool that holds a feminist potential. The monstrous-feminine is a concept that has hardly been studied in the realm of performance, despite the monstrous-feminine's prevalent and continuing presence in contemporary discourse and culture. Following Mieke Bal's notion of concepts that travel, I do explore the monstrous-feminine in contemporary performances, namely in *TANZ* (2019) by Florentina Holzinger, *JEZEBEL* (2019) by Cherish Menzo, and *HATE ME, TENDER* (2019) by Teresa Vittucci. Based on the analysis of the presence of the monstrous-feminine in these case studies, I argue that these performances hold a subversive potential that queers the negative affects that have been attached to the monstrous-feminine. By embracing the queerness and negativity of monstrosity through strategies of exaggeration and alienation, expressed through ownership and humour, these performances put forward a way to rethink monstrosity through their employment of subversive affect.

What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil,  
a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment,  
an evil of nature, painted with fair colours!  
– Heinrich Institoris and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487, reprint 1969), 43

‘It is not,’ he says, ‘that I dread her; it is that she herself is malignant, capable of any crime,  
a beast of prey, a vampire, a witch, insatiable in her desires.  
She is the very personification of what is sinister’.  
– Karen Horney, *Feminine Psychology* (1967), 135

The Monstrous Feminine is a Real Bitch. Watch Out!  
– Barbara Creed, *Re-Reading the Monstrous Feminine* (2020), 102

## Acknowledgments

I want to use this space to thank my amazing supervisor Laura Karreman for her great pep-talks, feedback, and support throughout the writing process and the entire year of studying Contemporary Theatre, Dance and Dramaturgy. Your care and enthusiasm were invaluable. A major thank you to my mother Mijntje and my sister Mirthe, who have been my rock and have provided me with literal and figurative homes throughout this year. Thank you to my dear friends – whom I hardly saw during the final stretch of this writing process because I was going into madwoman-mode on this thesis – thank you for telling me to take good care of myself. Thanks to my dear colleagues at Dagger Coffee, who have provided me with endless amounts of coffee. But most of all, thank you to myself: emotional, happy, sad, strong, monstrous woman, you did it.

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## Introduction

“All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject.”<sup>1</sup> This sentence marks the first page of the book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, a well-established work by feminist film scholar Barbara Creed, in which Creed analyses the representation of woman-as-monster in horror films. This connection between women and monsters has been longstanding. Aristotle already mentions how the female is a monstrous “anomaly, a variation on the main theme of man-kind.”<sup>2</sup> And, since Creed’s first mention of the monstrous-feminine in 1986, many scholars have adopted the concept to lay bare how both stereotype-affirming and -challenging forms of the monstrous-feminine have dominated cultural discourses. Throughout this thesis, I research the appearance of the monstrous-feminine in contemporary performance, a field in which the monstrous-feminine has not yet been discussed extensively. I study the monstrous-feminine in three contemporary theatre and dance performances, namely *TANZ* by Florentina Holzinger, *HATE ME, TENDER* by Teresa Vittucci, and *JEZEBEL* by Cherish Menzo.<sup>3</sup> By doing so, I strive to look for what the monstrous-feminine can *do* in performance and how it can entail a queer potential that can attach new affective meaning to monstrous-femininity.

Although Creed wrote her foundational book *The Monstrous-Feminine* in 1993, the monstrous-feminine remains prevalent in and relevant to contemporary society and debates, which reflects the academic and societal relevance of this research. As Creed herself elaborates in an interview in 2020, “here we are – 25 years later, and the concept of the monstrous-feminine continues to stimulate debate and discussion. I think this is largely because her various ‘faces’ have evolved over time, adapting to changing social and ideological conditions.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the monstrous-feminine has an enduring presence in society. In 2020, *Re-Reading the Monstrous-Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* was published, offering a more contemporary perspective on the

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 224.

<sup>3</sup> *HATE ME, TENDER*, concept and performance by Teresa Vittucci, ImPulsTanz Festival, Vienna, Austria, July 28, 2019, seen at What You See Festival, Theater Kikker, Utrecht, November 19, 2021.

*JEZEBEL*, concept, choreography, and performance by Cherish Menzo, Frascati, Amsterdam, November 5, 2019, seen via livestream at Nederlands Theater Festival, Frascati, Amsterdam, September 5, 2020.

*TANZ*, concept and choreography by Florentina Holzinger, Tanzquartier Wien, Vienna, Austria, October 3, 2019, seen at Stadsschouwburg Utrecht, May 28 and 29, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Creed, “*The Monstrous-Feminine, Then and Now: Barbara Creed in Conversation with Nicholas Chare*,” in *Re-Reading the Monstrous Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Nicholas Chare, Jeanette Hoorn, and Audrey Yue (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 96.

monstrous-feminine and exploring its relevance for recent cinematic and artistic practices.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Creed is currently working on an expanded edition of her *The Monstrous-Feminine*, which further highlights the relevance of her theory for research today.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in the past year, the monstrous-feminine has shown itself in my direct surroundings as well, from Paula Rego's exhibition on sexuality, power, and mythology at Kunstmuseum Den Haag and Pascale van Gorp's small exhibition on monstrous vagina's in Theater Kikker in Utrecht, all the way to the 2022 Pixar movie *Turning Red*.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of the monstrous-feminine has been researched in many academic fields, including literature, video games, Japanese culture, psychology, law, and organisation.<sup>8</sup> However, the subject of the monstrous-feminine remains quite underexposed in performance studies, in which only three authors refer explicitly to the monstrous-feminine in a performance context. Namely, Jeanette Hoorn, Rachel Gear, and Laini Burton discuss the monstrous-feminine in various performance art and pop culture performance practices.<sup>9</sup> These three writings offer a first glance at the meaning of the monstrous-feminine in performance. However, only a small number of artists are

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Chare, Jeanette Hoorn, and Audrey Yue, eds, *Re-Reading the Monstrous Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Also, Creed emphasises how gendered and sexual anxieties are still often represented in contemporary horror films.

Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, "Re-Reading *The Monstrous-Feminine*," in *Re-Reading the Monstrous Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Nicholas Chare, Jeanette Hoorn, and Audrey Yue (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Read more about Paula Rego's exhibition here: <https://www.kunstmuseum.nl/en/exhibitions/paula-rego>. Read more about Pascale van Gorp's monstrous vagina's here: <https://www.theaterkikker.nl/magazine/kikker-exposeert-wil-je-in-mijn-toscaanse-dorpje-wonen-van-pascale-van-gorp>. Read more about *Turning Red*, and the controversial critique it received on implicitly discussing menstruation and female sexuality, here: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/in-de-vrolijkje-horroranimatiefilm-turning-red-worden-puberperikelen-kunstig-verbloemd~bf64d2a6/> and <https://www.ad.nl/show/ouders-struikelen-over-maandverband-in-pixars-menstruatiehorror-turning-red~aafc79d4/>.

<sup>8</sup> For example Michael Thomson's "Legislating for the Monstrous: Access To Reproductive Services and the Monstrous Feminine" (1997), Jane M. Ussher's *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* (2006), Sheena J. Vachhani's "Always different?: exploring the monstrous-feminine and maternal embodiment in organisation" (2014), Raechel Dumas's *The Monstrous-Feminine in Contemporary Japanese Popular Culture* (2018), and Sarah Stang's "The Broodmother as Monstrous-Feminine—Abject Maternity in Video Games" (2019).

<sup>9</sup> First, Jeanette Hoorn discusses the art and performance art practices of Frida Kahlo, Judy Chicago, Cindy Sherman, Carolee Schneeman, and Destiny Deacon. Second, Rachel Gear reads the work of artists Orlan, Alexa Wright, and Linda Dement. Lastly, Laini Burton discusses Lady Gaga's persona 'Mother Monster'.

Jeanette Hoorn, "In-Your-Face: The Monstrous-Feminine in Photography, Performance Art, Multimedia, and Painting," in *Re-Reading the Monstrous Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Nicholas Chare, Jeanette Hoorn, and Audrey Yue (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 241-54.

Rachel Gear, "All those nasty womanly things: Women artists, technology and the monstrous-feminine," *Women's Studies International Forum* 24, no. 3-4 (May-August 2001): 321-33, DOI: 10.1016/S0277-5395(01)00184-4.

Laini Burton, "Abject Appeal and the Monstrous Feminine in Lady Gaga's Self-Fashioned Persona 'Mother Monster'," in *Retold Feminine Memoirs: Our Collective Past and Present*, ed. Gabriela Mádlo (Leiden: Brill, 2013), DOI: 10.1163/9781848881921\_007, 63-73.

discussed and, hitherto, there has not been enough discussion of the monstrous-feminine in contemporary performance in a theatre context. With this thesis, I aim to enhance the existing research by both broadening the existing discourse on the monstrous-feminine in contemporary performance and, additionally, by critically intervening in this discourse by pointing to the monstrous-feminine's queer and affective potential.

## 0.1 Theoretical framework

This research is rooted in two fields of study: the discourse on the monstrous-feminine and the discourses of affect and queer studies. First, the main concept I explore, the monstrous-feminine, derives from Australian feminist film scholar Creed. After coining the term monstrous-feminine in her 1986 article "Horror and the monstrous-feminine: an imaginary abjection," Creed researches the various ways women are represented as monstrous in horror films in *The Monstrous-Feminine*, in which she distinguishes seven 'faces' of the monstrous-feminine.<sup>10</sup> Sexuality is foundational for the monstrous-feminine because, as Creed notes, "[a]s with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality."<sup>11</sup> Additionally, maternal and reproductive functions prove crucial for understanding how women are constructed as monstrous.<sup>12</sup> Creed is the first scholar who places the representations of women as monster central, while simultaneously critiquing the patriarchal foundations on which this stereotypical imagery is built.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Creed emphasises how women *are* constructed as monstrous but values the monstrous-feminine also for its force and potential.

To elaborate, reading the position of the monstrous-feminine as active, as Creed does, does not mean that this monstrous imagery can immediately be considered feminist or liberated.<sup>14</sup>

Namely, Creed describes how

[w]oman is not, by her very nature, an abject being. Her representation in popular discourses as monstrous is a function of the ideological project of the horror film – a project designed to perpetuate the belief that woman's monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man's sexual other.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara Creed, "Horror and the monstrous-feminine: an imaginary abjection," *Screen* 27, no. 1 (1986): 45-70.

<sup>11</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 8, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Other scholars have followed Freud's argument of considering woman monstrous because she is castrated. Creed criticises Freud's theory of castration by considering the possibility that woman frightens because she might *castrate* as well, thus considering the possibility of woman as castrator.

Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 83.



Despite the patriarchal foundation that Creed makes explicit here, she *does* describe how reading the monstrous-feminine as active might evoke an oppositional reading that can excavate the patriarchal ideology embedded in these monstrous stereotypical representations.<sup>16</sup> This subversive quality is the main starting point for this thesis, wherein affect and queer theory support this oppositionality.

My approach to Creed's work is reinforced by referring to her key sources, rooted in psychoanalysis: Julia Kristeva and Sigmund Freud.<sup>17</sup> In *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Creed bases her argumentation on Kristeva's concept of the abject and rethinks Freud's theories on sexuality. The focus on the abject and sexuality that Kristeva and Freud, respectively, bring forward, provides further understanding of monstrous-femininity, as well as entry points for analysis of monstrous-femininity in the performative realm. This entry into performance studies, as well as into more contemporary presentations of monstrous-femininity, is strengthened by referring to several chapters of the 2020 edited volume *Re-Reading the Monstrous-Feminine* and the works of Gear and Burton, as previously mentioned. The mapping of this discourse is done in Chapter 1.

In Chapter 2, I support my reading of the monstrous-feminine with theoretical strands on affect and queerness. For this purpose, my starting point is British-Australian feminist, queer, and postcolonial scholar Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. My reference to affect theory aids to understand, in Ahmed's words, "how emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies," and, thus, to understand the workings of the monstrous-feminine and its potential when employed in performance.<sup>18</sup> Looking at the monstrous-feminine in performances through this lens of affect shows how the negative affects attached to monstrous-femininity are not put to the side but appreciated and put to work.

Further, I refer to American gender and queer scholars Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler to explore the meaning, subversive quality, and potential of queerness. Sedgwick's "Queer and Now" and the introductory chapter of *Touching Feeling* aid to bridge the discourses of affect and queerness.<sup>19</sup> Butler's *Bodies that Matter's* introductory chapter and chapter "Critically Queer" support the understanding of queerness, as well as a linkage of queerness to abjection.<sup>20</sup> To highlight the potential of queerness, I refer to the Cuban-American scholar in queer theory José Esteban

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<sup>16</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 61, 83, 165-66.

<sup>17</sup> For this purpose, I refer to Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) and Sigmund Freud's writings "Female Sexuality" (1964) and "Fetishism" (1964).

<sup>18</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 1-20. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: affect, pedagogy, performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 1-25.

<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

Muñoz and his work *Cruising Utopia*.<sup>21</sup> To support the (affective) potential of the negatively considered queerness and the negatively considered monstrous-feminine, I follow Muñoz's argument and refer to Paulo Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude*.<sup>22</sup> In addition to affect, the notion of queerness reinforces understanding how the proposed contemporary performances can suggest a subversive, queer reading in which the negative affects the monstrous-feminine carries within itself lead to a new mode of critical potentiality. The analysis of this affective and queer potential of the monstrous-feminine in my performance case studies forms the content of Chapter 3.

Thus, the main question I answer in this thesis is: how can performing the monstrous-feminine evoke an oppositional affective and queer understanding of monstrous-femininity? This question is answered throughout a discussion of the following sub-questions. First, how has the monstrous-feminine been developed so far as a concept within the academic debates on film and performance? Second, how do the academic discourses on affect and queerness enable a rethinking of the monstrous-feminine in which its affective and queer potential can be explored? Third, how might *TANZ* by Florentina Holzinger, *HATE ME, TENDER* by Teresa Vittucci, and *JEZEBEL* by Cherish Menzo subvert the negative affects of the monstrous-feminine and evoke a queer way of understanding the monstrous-feminine?

## 0.2 Method

To answer these research questions, I perform qualitative literary research and concept-based performance analysis of my case studies. To develop these concept-based analyses, I refer to Mieke Bal's *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*. To clarify, Bal sets out a methodological reflection that revolves around the "methodological potential of concepts."<sup>23</sup> Bal approaches concepts as miniature theories, which opens up their analytical potential in performing cultural analysis.<sup>24</sup> To explain the flexible and open yet complex and nuanced nature of concepts, Bal elaborates how concepts "travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities. Between disciplines, their meaning, reach, and operational value differ."<sup>25</sup> Concepts, thus, can be put into action in different contexts, creating a difference in their meaning.

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<sup>21</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Paulo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 10.

<sup>24</sup> Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, 24.

In this thesis, the monstrous-feminine, which was coined in the realm of film studies and is rooted in psychoanalytic theory, travels into performance studies and is discussed in relation to stagings of the monstrous-feminine encountered in my case studies. By performing this travelling motion, I study the workings of the monstrous-feminine in a performance context, laying bare how the concept informs my case studies as objects of study, as well as how these objects may inform or bring about new meanings of the monstrous-feminine. That reciprocity is also where my relation to the discourses of affect and queerness comes into play.

In Chapter 3, I discuss three case studies, looking through the lens of the monstrous-feminine. First, *TANZ* by the Austrian performance artist Holzinger (1986) restages the classical ballet *Les Sylphides* (1909) in a two-hour-long performance in which ten mostly naked women perform a combination of ballet, stunt circus, and freak show. Second, in *HATE ME, TENDER*, the Austrian performer and dancer Vittucci (1985) emancipates the figure of the Virgin Mary and explores the queer potential of this female icon, idolised for her purity and perfection. Last, *JEZEBEL* by the Dutch dancer and choreographer Menzo (1988) stages an attempt at positively reclaiming the stereotypical Black female *video vixen* as portrayed in hip-hop culture in the late 90s and noughties. These stagings of the monstrous-feminine are my focus throughout my concept-based performance analyses.<sup>26</sup>

These three performances are valuable to analyse because all three performances show an overlap in the presentation of monstrous-femininity they put forward. Additionally, each of these works premiered in 2019 in either Austria or the Netherlands, making them recent performances that have been created in a West-European context. These works were performed in the Netherlands in 2020 or 2021, making them relate to my position of writing and researching from the Netherlands in 2022. Furthermore, all performances have won awards, underlining the qualitative value of these performances and the importance of the contemporary debates they tap into.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Holzinger has been recognised as a phenomenon in the performance scene with her characteristic oeuvre, determined by an all-female cast, a feminist stamp, nakedness, provocation, art historic references, stunts, and critique on the representation of female bodies in media and arts.<sup>28</sup> Also, Menzo is an appreciated performer in the Dutch and international dance world, who has been characterised by

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<sup>26</sup> In addition to me having watched the performances live or, in the case of *JEZEBEL*, via livestream, the performance makers have been so generous to share a video registration of their performance with me.

<sup>27</sup> *TANZ* was considered the 'Inszenierung des Jahres' 2020, as a result of a critic survey of the German magazine Theater Heute. *HATE ME, TENDER* won the Swiss Dance Award in 2019. *JEZEBEL* was awarded the Best of Fringe Award and the Fringe International Bursary 2019 and was nominated for the Prize of the Dutch Dance Days Maastricht in 2020 and the BNG Bank Theaterprijs in 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Charlotte De Somviele, "Ik creëer schoonheid met andere regels," *Standaard*, November 12, 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211111\\_98114283](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211111_98114283).

Moos van den Broek, "Een goddelijk orgasme als ultieme ontsnapping," *Theaterkrant*, August 22, 2021, review of *A Divine Comedy* by Florentina Holzinger, <https://www.theaterkrant.nl/recensie/a-divine-comedy/florentina-holzinger/>.

Belgian newspaper *De Standaard* as “between woman and freak, human and animal, hiphop and contemporary, intangible and stereotypical.”<sup>29</sup> Her artistry is described as transforming the body on stage through alienation, caused by playing with recognisable images in a controversial way.<sup>30</sup> Lastly, despite having had less performances in the Netherlands than Holzinger and Menzo, Vittucci is characterised for being one of the “most promising artists” in Switzerland and valued for her denunciation of body normativity and unapologetic staging of the queer body.<sup>31</sup> Thus, these three performances all provide a critical stance on the body from a born-as-female perspective, with a feminist point of entry, making them valuable case studies for analysing the monstrous-feminine.<sup>32</sup>

By bringing these performances in conversation with each other and with my proposed theoretical framework of both monstrous-femininity and of affect and queerness, the critique that these contemporary works bring on representations of the female body is explored in more depth. Since all performances employ strategies of alienation and exaggeration, as I explore in Chapter 3, these performances are vital for investigating how performing the monstrous-feminine might rework the negative affects attached to this stereotype. Thus, throughout this thesis, I explore how ‘sticking’ with the negative connotation and affects of monstrosity entails a queering of the understanding of the monstrous-feminine in these three contemporary performances.

Additionally, this thesis argues for a more inclusive approach to monstrous-femininity and attempts to move beyond the binarism that can be read in the concept of monstrous-femininity. Importantly, I write from the position of a West-European white cisgender female. Being aware of this subject position, my analyses of monstrous-femininity are still largely coloured by this privileged position, in which I cannot speak for others more marginalised. However, I find it important to both

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<sup>29</sup> Charlotte De Somviele, “Succes is geweldig, maar het veroorzaakt ook veel druk,” *Standaard*, August 19, 2020, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200818\\_97590655](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200818_97590655).

Annette Embrechts, “In haar danssolo Jezebel pleit Cherish Menzo voor een positiever vrouwbeeld: ‘Mijn moeder was ontroerd,’” *Volkscrant*, September 3, 2020, interview with Cherish Menzo, <https://www.volkscrant.nl/cultuur-media/in-haar-danssolo-jezebel-pleit-cherish-menzo-voor-een-positiever-vrouwbeeld-mijn-moeder-was-ontroerd~b55f10e5/>.

<sup>30</sup> “Cherish Menzo,” GRIP, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.grip.house/maker/cherish-menzo/>.

<sup>31</sup> Isabelle Fuchs quoted in “‘Hate me, tender’, Teresa Vittucci,” Swiss Culture Awards – Federal Office of Culture, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.schweizerkulturpreise.ch/awards/en/home/tanz/tanz-archiv/tanz-2019/stp-2019/hate-me--tender.html>.

Marijn Lems, “Lang okselhaar en een Maria-pose. Bij het festival What You See is het lichaam een strijdtoneel,” *NRC*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2021/11/22/lang-okselhaar-en-een-maria-pose-bij-het-festival-what-you-see-is-het-lichaam-een-strijdtoneel-a4066355>.

David Pallant, “Let’s Make Something Queer,” *Tanzschreiber*, March 6, 2019, <https://tanzschreiber.de/en/lets-make-something-queer/>.

<sup>32</sup> With the choice of discussing Vittucci’s *HATE ME, TENDER*, this thesis wishes to put forward a more queer and non-binary perspective. By discussing *JEZEBEL*, this thesis wishes to elaborate on the association of Black women with monstrosity specifically.

claim and, in claiming the term, critique the notion of women and femininity.<sup>33</sup> Since, as Butler states, “it remains politically necessary to lay claim to “women,” “queer,” “gay,” and “lesbian,” precisely because of the way these terms, as it were, lay their claim on us prior to our full knowing.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, this research into the monstrous-feminine might be considered a subversion in itself, in which I employ the term but also propose a way to consider it differently, through its affective and queer potential.

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<sup>33</sup> For example and additionally, Rosi Braidotti considers women as “not only the biocultural entities thus represented as women, the empirical subjects of sociopolitical realities, but also the discursive field of feminist theory, which has made it a political priority to reappraise the status of embodied female subjects.” Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 215.

<sup>34</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 174.

Woman is not born monstrous but is constructed as such.

– Cristina Santos, *Unbecoming Female Monsters: Witches, Vampires, and Virgins* (2016), xiii

## Chapter 1: The monstrous-feminine in film and performance

In this chapter, I define the concept of the monstrous-feminine by drawing on Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine*, as well as important sources for her – Kristeva and Freud – and more recent sources that are influenced by Creed's writing. By introducing this notion of the monstrous-feminine, Creed describes the specific monstrosity that is tied to the stereotype of the feminine, which is not “a simple reversal of [the] ‘male monster’” but rather a monstrous figure created under the influence of gender and anxieties concerning the female body.<sup>35</sup> Creed is the first scholar that works with this term: she considers the position of women in horror films as monstrous – thus, as active subjects and not as passive victims – and simultaneously critiques patriarchal ideologies, such as Freud's theory of castration, by which monstrous-femininity is constructed.

In the structuring of this chapter, I first follow Creed's argumentative line and, after, build further on her work.<sup>36</sup> I start with defining the concept of the monstrous-feminine, whereafter I delve into Kristeva's notion of the abject. Continuing, I analyse Freud's psychoanalytic theory of sexuality and Creed's critique, after which I enter into a more recent perspective on the monstrous-feminine by referring to *Re-Reading the Monstrous-Feminine*. These recent re-readings support my bridge to performance studies, for which I employ various sources to build a theoretical foundation for entering into dialogue with my case studies in Chapter 3. Thus, this chapter answers the following sub-question: how has the monstrous-feminine been developed so far as a concept within the academic debates on film and performance?

### 1.1 The monstrous-feminine

Coined in her 1986 article “Horror and the monstrous-feminine: an imaginary abjection” and expanded on in the book *The Monstrous-Feminine*, the monstrous-feminine is a concept that has been developed by feminist film scholar Creed. Looking at the genre of the horror film, the monstrous-feminine denotes how women have been depicted and considered monsters, already drawing on “images that haunted the dreams, myths and artistic practices of our forebears many

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<sup>35</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> In the first half of *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Creed discusses five faces of the monstrous-feminine concerning reproductive and maternal functions in relation to the abject. In the second half, Creed emphasises her critique of Freud's psychoanalytic theory of castration by discussing various monstrous faces of the woman as castrator.

centuries ago.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, the monstrous-feminine notes all that society has deemed frightening about women and the female body.

In *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Creed discusses seven ‘faces’ of the monstrous-feminine in horror films from the 70s and 80s of the twentieth century, such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *Carrie* (1976), and *Alien* (1979). These seven faces include the archaic mother, the possessed monster, the monstrous womb, the vampire, the witch, the castrating mother, the *femme castratrice* and the *vagina dentata*. Throughout, Creed argues that both female sexuality and maternal reproductive functions have been important sources of inspiration for these monstrous depictions of women. By choosing the term *monstrous-feminine*, instead of female monster, Creed emphasises the influence of gender on the construction of monstrosity.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Creed has coined the monstrous-feminine to emphasise the specificities of feminine monstrosity that come to light in these seven faces.<sup>39</sup>

In this approach to women as monsters, Creed takes up a distinguished position in the discourse on gender and horror. To be exact, Creed is the first theoretician who places the representations of women as monsters central, while simultaneously criticising Freud’s theory of castration, in which Freud states that woman terrifies because she is castrated.<sup>40</sup> Other scholars have dismissed the monstrosity of women and merely discussed the woman as a victim or have based their argument on Freud’s male-centric ideas.<sup>41</sup> Creed provides a different approach: she analyses the presence of the monstrous-feminine in horror films to argue how woman also terrifies because she might *castrate* and how woman’s close relations to the abject cause an ambiguous horror and fascination with the monstrous-feminine.<sup>42</sup>

The connection of the feminine with horror and monstrosity has its roots in patriarchal perspectives, in which the position of women has been regarded as inferior or *other*. To highlight this patriarchal foundation, Creed explains that “[t]he presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular

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<sup>37</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism,” in *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works*, vol. 21 of *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, reprint (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), 154.

<sup>41</sup> For example, Creed analyses that Gérard Lenne, in his article “Monster and victim: women in the horror film” (1979), argues that there are female monsters but that those are not real monsters; and that James B. Twitchell, in his book *Dreadful Pleasures* (1985), argues that femininity in any form excludes monstrosity. Author Stephen Neale, in *Genre* (1980), does try to research the nature of monstrosity in relation to gender, but still considers the horror film as a fetishist display based on seeing women as castrated. In “The Construction of the ‘Castrated Woman’ in Psychoanalysis and Cinema” (1981), Susan Lurie argues that men fear woman because they are *not* castrated, instead of the Freudian position of considering women as castrated. In contrast to these writers, only Linda Williams, in her article “When the woman looks” (1984) considers women not, by definition, as victims. Williams does open up a way to consider female monstrosity as powerful but does not discuss the nature of monstrous-femininity, which is what Creed does research in her work.

Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 3-6.

<sup>42</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 14, 87.

horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire of feminine subjectivity.”<sup>43</sup> Here, Creed argues how the monstrous-feminine is not essentially an empowering representation but might rather confirm the negative images attached to the feminine. Thus, Creed underlines how portraying or considering women as active monsters – instead of passive victims – does not necessarily mean that this representation or reading can be considered feminist.

However, Creed states that the presence of the monstrous-feminine *does* “challenge the view that the male spectator is almost always situated in an active, sadistic position and the female spectator in a passive, masochistic one.”<sup>44</sup> To expand, how and by whom the monstrous-feminine is presented in horror films – or other artistic contexts – is important in how it might be approached from a feminist perspective. The monstrous-feminine is often employed from a male perspective: also, many of the horror films that Creed discusses are directed by cisgender men.<sup>45</sup> However, there lies a feminist potential in the concept when other people than cisgender men use the monstrous stereotype. For example, as more women take up the direction of horror films, which happens in more contemporary horror, the monstrous-feminine can show itself as “a clear and direct challenge to dominant patriarchal values,” as Creed highlights in the re-reading of her *The Monstrous-Feminine*.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, a close reading of Creed’s work shows how the figure of the monstrous-feminine has been present for a long time in human history. In the horror film genre, the monstrosity of women knows several faces, in which sexuality and maternal functions are placed centrally. Looking at contemporary approaches to the monstrous-feminine, it becomes clear how the monstrous-feminine can be used to criticise the patriarchal thoughts on which the concept is built. Building forth on this patriarchy-challenging recreation of the monstrous-feminine, I do not want to highlight the discussion of whether the monstrous-feminine is feminist or not but I rather emphasise how the monstrous-feminine might be employed in various artistic contexts as a tool that holds a feminist potential.

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<sup>43</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Creed does not mention this herself, but Patricia Pisters does analyse this in Creed’s work. Patricia Pisters, “Carrie’s Sisters: New Blood in Contemporary Female Horror Cinema,” in *Re-Reading the Monstrous Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Nicholas Chare, Jeanette Hoorn, and Audrey Yue (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 121.

<sup>46</sup> Creed, “Then and Now,” 96.



## 1.2 Abjection

The abject, as elaborated on by Kristeva, is one of Creed's starting points for discussing the monstrous-feminine. Kristeva describes the abject as that "[w]hat disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."<sup>47</sup> The abject is thus an ambiguous phenomenon, in which boundaries between human and non-human, subject and object, and inside and outside become blurry. This ambiguity is also expressed in how the abject both repels and attracts: it is both horrifying and fascinating.<sup>48</sup> Creed mainly refers to three points from Kristeva's theories, which are the idea of the border, the relationship between mother and child, and the feminine body.<sup>49</sup> In the following, I elaborate on these three elements of Kristeva's abjection to clarify the relationship between the monstrous-feminine and the psychoanalytic notion of the abject.

Firstly, the notion of the border and, more specifically, the blurring of borders is crucial in Kristeva's line of argumentation on abjection. Namely, the abject becomes especially pronounced when bodily fluids such as blood, urine, faeces, or organs become visible, utmost expressed in the visual of the corpse.<sup>50</sup> These images all deal with a blurring of the inside versus the outside of the body, which causes a feeling of abjection to emerge. Kristeva elaborates on the abject as "something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us."<sup>51</sup> The abject is, thus, something that we reject because it challenges the boundaries of our subjectivity.

Secondly, an important aspect of abjection is how the child abjectifies their mother. In psychoanalytic theories, it is described how, to form their subjectivity, the child has to separate themselves from their mother.<sup>52</sup> Here, Kristeva distinguishes between a maternal authority and paternal, the former dominated by the natural world and the latter by order and law.<sup>53</sup> Kristeva notes how the mother teaches the infant about its body through a so-called "mapping of the self's clean and proper body."<sup>54</sup> The paternal world is brought into relation with notions of cleanliness and order, while the maternal is related to pollution both from the outside – excremental – and from the inside

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<sup>47</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3, 53.

<sup>51</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 72.

<sup>54</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 72.

– menstrual.<sup>55</sup> In this sense, the figure of the mother becomes the site of the abject, of the thing that is or must be “radically excluded” from the child’s subjectivity.<sup>56</sup>

Thirdly, Kristeva places the female body in close relation to the abject. According to Kristeva, abjectness becomes pronounced through the womb and its specific relation to (menstrual) blood, life, and death, linking the womb-carrying body to the animal world and the circle of life.<sup>57</sup> To explain, this body is considered as able of shapeshifting, due to the change of physique caused by pregnancy.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the birthing of a baby is considered a strong abject blurring of boundaries between the inside and outside.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, Kristeva considers the (cis-)female body as particularly abject, due to connections to blood, mothering functions, nature, and animalism.

Reflecting on the abject, Creed notes how, for her, abjection is exemplary of how horror works concerning the monstrous-feminine.<sup>60</sup> Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* was published in 1982, shortly after Creed found her interest in monstrous representations of women in the horror film, a representation that emerged strongly in the 1970s.<sup>61</sup> Kristeva’s abjection seems to portray and explain the monstrous qualities assigned to women, handing Creed an important foundation for her argumentation on the monstrous-feminine.

Reflecting on abjection, Creed emphasises how women are not naturally abject but constructed as such. Namely, she regards “the association of woman’s maternal and reproductive functions with the abject as a construct of patriarchal ideology.”<sup>62</sup> The link between monstrous-femininity and abjection is, thus, a result of negative patriarchal stereotypes. In addition, Creed first noted the monstrous-feminine’s abjection as *imaginary*, highlighting this stereotypical quality of monstrous-femininity as fictional and, thus, constructed.<sup>63</sup> However, as Creed and Kristeva both put forward, the notion of abjection carries within itself a “radical potential” that might subvert these negative stereotypes on which the monstrous-feminine is based.<sup>64</sup> This potential of the abject creates a foundation for the affective and queer potential of the monstrous-feminine I argue for in Chapter 3.

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<sup>55</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 71.

<sup>56</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 96, 101, 155.

<sup>58</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 49-50.

<sup>59</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 101.

<sup>60</sup> Creed, “Then and Now,” 95.

<sup>61</sup> Creed, “Then and Now,” 95.

<sup>62</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 83.

<sup>63</sup> Creed, “Then and Now,” 96.

<sup>64</sup> Creed, “Then and Now,” 104.

Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 45.

### 1.3 Gender, sexual difference, and sexuality

As can be read throughout the previous paragraphs, gender and sexuality are of importance for understanding the monstrous-feminine. Creed refers to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Freudian psychoanalysis to elaborate on how the idea of sexual difference seems to largely constitute the consideration of women as monstrous. Freud's psychoanalysis discussed male (castration-)anxiety towards female sexuality, which is one of the patriarchal and phallogocentric thought patterns that have informed the image of the monstrous-feminine.<sup>65</sup> To expand on the influence of gender on the construction of monstrosity, I explore patriarchal considerations of sexual difference and highlight Creed's critique.

In psychoanalysis, the roots of the monstrous-feminine, sexual difference is described as

assigned according to whether individual subjects do or do not possess the phallus, which means not that anatomical difference is sexual difference [...], but that anatomical difference comes to figure sexual difference, that is, it becomes the sole representative of what that difference is allowed to be.<sup>66</sup>

Reflecting on this quote, *difference* is foundational in the constitution of relations between humans, mostly in a very opposition-based and binary structure. Highlighting the sexual base of difference, Freud described how "[w]e have, after all, long given up any expectation of a neat parallelism between male and female sexual development."<sup>67</sup> Reading his work, it becomes apparent how Freud considered women as a lack, as missing something, as being castrated: how women acknowledge "the superiority of the male and [their] own inferiority."<sup>68</sup> Thus, Freud mainly emphasised how women are *different* from men in a negative way and largely in relation to sexuality.

In response, Creed notes that Freud seems to have drawn biased conclusions.<sup>69</sup> Freud's psychoanalysis is written with a heteronormative and cisgender norm in mind. Additionally, Freud's line of argumentation is strongly based on patriarchal and phallogocentric worldviews, partly due to his male perspective. As psychoanalytic Karen Horney analyses, to whom *Re-Reading the Monstrous-Feminine* refers, the psychoanalytic representation of the development of women has "been

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<sup>65</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 2, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Jacqueline Rose, "Introduction – II," in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 41.

<sup>67</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality," in *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works*, vol. 21 of *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, reprint (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), 226.

<sup>68</sup> Freud, "Female Sexuality," 229.

<sup>69</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 120-121.

measured by masculine standards.”<sup>70</sup> Creed further explains the patriarchal foundations of the monstrous-feminine when stating how this patriarchal perspective considers

feminine imagination [...] as essentially non-violent, peaceful, unaggressive. This is the very argument that patriarchal ideology has used for the past 2,000 years to control women – it is precisely because women by definition are ‘pure’ creatures that they need men to ‘guide’ them through life’s stormy passage.<sup>71</sup>

As a result, the male perspective in Freud’s theories has caused him to repress the possibility of the woman as castrator, which is aggressive and violent: a face of monstrous-femininity that Creed *does* describe and analyse.

In opposition to the Freudian image of women as castrated, the monstrous faces of the *vagina dentata* and the female vampire, among others, show the woman as castrator.<sup>72</sup> By highlighting these – mythical – castrating forces, Creed “foregrounds the body as signifier of a sex, of sexual difference, as a contested site of meaning. The vagina is open to being figured not only as a signifier of lack but also as a substantial force, a castrating entity.”<sup>73</sup> Instead of seeing the female body as missing something – as castrated, as lack, as without male genitals like Freud considered – the female body is valued for its force: an essential part of understanding the potential of monstrous-femininity and its possible contra-patriarchal use.

To elaborate, first, a longstanding myth is the *vagina dentata*, or: the toothed vagina. In its mythical and artistic imagery, the *vagina dentata* expresses how “women are terrifying because they have teeth in their vaginas and that the women must be tamed or the teeth somehow removed or softened [...] before intercourse can safely take place.”<sup>74</sup> Second, the female vampire also portrays monstrous female sexuality: an insatiable sexual desire. Creed describes the lesbian vampire as particularly monstrous, since “the combination of ‘lesbian’ and ‘vampire’ is a happy one since both figures are represented in popular culture as sexually aggressive women.”<sup>75</sup> The lesbian vampire is doubling her monstrousness since, next to transforming her victims into vampires, she “threatens to seduce the daughters of patriarchy away from their proper gender roles.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Karen Horney, *Feminine Psychology* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), 57.

<sup>71</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 156.

<sup>72</sup> Creed also mentions the *femme castratrice* and the castrating mother as castrating monstrous-femininities. I have chosen to elaborate on the *vagina dentata* and the female vampire because I refer to those in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

<sup>73</sup> Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, “Re-Reading *The Monstrous-Feminine*,” 7.

<sup>74</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 59.

<sup>76</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 61.

These two faces of monstrous-femininity are exemplary of how expressions of sexuality and actions against heteronormative structures are considered frightening, and thus monstrous, when looking at monstrous-femininity from the perspective of the patriarchal ideologies by which the concept has been constructed. As this section explored, Creed's rethinking of Freudian sexual difference provides a reversal of this way of thinking: Creed proposes the consideration of female sexuality as a force, instead of as a lack.

#### 1.4 Re-reading the monstrous-feminine

To position Creed's monstrous-feminine within a contemporary context, recent sources that build further on monstrous-femininity prove vital. The 2020 book *Re-Reading the Monstrous-Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, edited by Nicholas Chare, Jeanette Hoorn, and Audrey Yue, provides such a contemporary reading. Namely, this source analyses more contemporary instances of monstrous-femininity, adds different cultural and geographic contexts, and provides insight into monstrous-femininity in other art forms than horror film, such as painting and performance art. This bridge is necessary to re-establish the monstrous-feminine for my analysis of monstrous-femininity in contemporary performances. Hereafter, I elaborate on this edited book, after which I add to the contemporary consideration of the monstrous-feminine by expanding the monstrous-feminine into performance studies, by referring to Hoorn, Gear and Burton.

To contextualise, it is important to specify the time in which Creed has written her work on the monstrous-feminine because it ties into movements on emancipation and representation of that time period and it has been over 30 years since its first mention. Creed established the concept of the monstrous-feminine in the 1990s, referring to a development in the horror film genre in the 70s and 80s. As Patricia Pisters analyses in her chapter in *Re-Reading the Monstrous-Feminine*, this development was influenced by the sexual liberation and emancipation movements of that time.<sup>77</sup> However, Chare, Hoorn, and Yue put forward how the monstrous-feminine has continuing relevance, when stating that "the kinds of anxieties regarding genders and sexualities that Creed examines in her book are remarkably enduring in horror films," and that "many of the themes and issues [...] continue to manifest in contemporary art and cinema."<sup>78</sup> *Re-Reading the Monstrous-Feminine* expands on this long-lasting presence of monstrous-femininity in cultural discourses by bringing the monstrous-feminine in dialogue with more contemporary films and artworks, as well as a recontextualisation of earlier films.

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<sup>77</sup> Pisters, "Carrie's Sisters," 121.

<sup>78</sup> Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, "Re-Reading *The Monstrous-Feminine*," 2.

As a red thread through Chare, Hoorn, and Yue's work lies the analysis of how recent occurrences of monstrous-femininity in cultural forms can provide an oppositional reading.<sup>79</sup> They state that art, film, and literature can "embody a political aesthetics crafted to work against paranoid hatred of the Other through exposing the psychic motivations undergirding such hatred and, possibly, purging them."<sup>80</sup> This oppositional potential is partly tied to a change in the identity of the artist or director. Namely, Hoorn states that "[m]any women artists have taken these stereotypes and recreated them from their own perspectives, often with enormous flair and dark humour, in order to challenge male anxieties and patriarchal myths about women."<sup>81</sup> Thus, when looking at the monstrous-feminine, it is important to take the context in which it is created into account, to be able to consider and analyse the oppositional potential it might hold.

## 1.5 Finding the monstrous-feminine in performance

To be able to discuss the monstrous-feminine in contemporary performances, I elaborate on connections between performance and monstrous-femininity that have been made in the existing discourse. Here, I build on the oppositional quality that the monstrous-feminine can hold, as explored above. Three authors that lay the foundation for me to explore the monstrous-feminine in performance are Hoorn, Gear, and Burton. In analysing their work, I highlight the strategies that these three authors have used and consider them a framework for approaching my case study performances in Chapter 3, as a bridge between the film-based theories on the monstrous-feminine and the contemporary performances.

Firstly, Hoorn discusses performance art by female artists, its reception, and the academic discourse to analyse how the monstrous-feminine is at work, creating a "new culture and a new language to enable and inspire their fight for equality."<sup>82</sup> Importantly, Hoorn specifically expands Creed's argument towards a discussion of the particular relation of Black and Indigenous women to the monstrous-feminine. Namely, Hoorn analyses that "[r]ace has rarely been interpreted in the context of the monstrous-feminine," emphasising the need to further research on this subject.<sup>83</sup> Through her analysis of the works of Destiny Deacon and Tracey Moffatt, who are both Indigenous Australian artists, Hoorn emphasises the relation between the monstrous-feminine and "borders, and their erosion, between opposing entities: feminine and masculine powers, black and white

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<sup>79</sup> Creed herself also already hinted at this possibility, as can be read in section 1.1, but *Re-Reading* provides a more expanded and deeper overview of contemporary instances in which this oppositionality is explored.

<sup>80</sup> Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, "Re-Reading *The Monstrous-Feminine*," 25.

<sup>81</sup> Hoorn, "In-Your-Face," 241.

<sup>82</sup> Hoorn, "In-Your-Face," 252.

<sup>83</sup> Hoorn, "In-Your-Face," 242.

subjects and between indigenous peoples and colonial invaders.”<sup>84</sup> Providing a more intersectional approach, Hoorn emphasises how colonialism and sexism closely interrelate in the creation of monstrous-feminine stereotype.

Second, Gear emphasises the physical materiality of the body in her discussion of the relationship of the monstrous-feminine to technology. Gear states how reading the work of the French artist Orlan, British Alexa Wright, and Australian Linda Dement “in the light of the monstrous-feminine opens up potentially liberating modes of knowing and experiencing the materiality of the female body.”<sup>85</sup> What becomes clear from Gear’s analysis is how the many women artists employ the monstrous-feminine in processes of ambiguity, hybridity, and a crossing of borders, which these particular artists express via their engagement with technology. Gear’s emphasis on physical materiality further emphasises the need to look at the use and the presence of the material body on stage. Additionally, it highlights how performances can play with the ambiguity and border-crossing that the monstrous-feminine entails.

Third, Burton reflects on the self-fashioned performative persona of Lady Gaga, where Gaga positions herself as ‘Mother Monster’: she is performing the monstrous-feminine. As Burton emphasises, the abjection that Gaga evokes is “a *performed* abjection, carefully self-controlled.”<sup>86</sup> However, Burton does place a critical note that Gaga almost appropriates abjection, by positioning herself in the position of marginalised others that she is not.<sup>87</sup> For example, Gaga has notoriously performed in a wheelchair.<sup>88</sup> Despite this critical note, Burton’s notion of performing abjection opens up the possibility to consider performing ownership, in which artists take up the position of the monstrous-feminine willingly and play with performing abjection and monstrosity.

## 1.6 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I looked at how the concept of the monstrous-feminine has been established in academic debates on film and performance. The monstrous-feminine denotes how women have been depicted as monstrous in horror films. Being the key scholar in this debate, Creed analyses the active position of women as monsters, instead of analysing women as passive victims, opening up a way to look at monstrous-femininity that acknowledges the influence of gender on the construction of monstrosity. Largely based on Kristeva’s abjection and critiquing Freud’s theories of sexuality, the

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<sup>84</sup> Hoorn, “In-Your-Face,” 243.

<sup>85</sup> Gear, “Nasty womanly things,” 321.

<sup>86</sup> Burton, “Abject Appeal,” 66.

<sup>87</sup> Burton, “Abject Appeal,” 66.

<sup>88</sup> Burton, “Abject Appeal,” 65-66.

monstrous-feminine is closely tied to ambiguity, maternity, birthing, blood, and sex. Then, moving into performance studies, looking into Hoorn's, Burton's, and Gear's works has provided us with a first frame through which to approach the contemporary performances in Chapter 3. Hoorn, Gear, and Burton explore how various artists have performed the monstrous-feminine. The act of translating the monstrous-feminine into a performative context opens up new opportunities for giving meaning concerning an intersectional approach, the materiality of the performing body, and female artists claiming ownership in performing the monstrous-feminine. However, Burton does describe the danger of rearticulating difference in a performance context: it may render the monstrous back into otherness and "excessive performance could be seen to counter any productive re-signification."<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, Burton nuances this expression by referring to Butler's notion of performativity, because "performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer."<sup>90</sup> Despite Burton's critical note, performing the monstrous-feminine, thus, creates the possibility of creating a destabilisation of how we look at monstrous-femininity. This oppositional and destabilising potential of the monstrous-feminine forms the starting point for Chapter 2, in which I argue for the queer and affective potential of monstrous-femininity in performance.

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<sup>89</sup> Burton, "Abject Appeal," 68.

<sup>90</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), iix.



The question is then, how to be in the world as a body that is ‘female’? That is, how to perform for the gaze of others by which we know and tell others ‘who I am’ as a person who is a ‘woman’, which may be as lesbian or heterosexual, or transgender. Yet we are formed as much by our resistance as by our acquiescence to the constructions our affective relations give rise to.

– Elizabeth Cowie, *Re-Reading the Monstrous-Feminine* (2020), 72

## Chapter 2: The affective and queer potential of the monstrous-feminine

As I illustrated in Chapter 1, the monstrous-feminine can function contra-patriarchal and oppositional. In this chapter, I argue that this oppositionality comes into action through the monstrous-feminine’s close relation to affect and queerness. This chapter, in which I thus research the affective and queer potential of the monstrous-feminine, explores how the affective dimensions of the monstrous-feminine are important to facilitate a possible subversion – or queering – of the negative emotions and negativity attached to monstrous-femininity. Drawing on authors such as Ahmed, Sedgwick, Butler, and Muñoz, I argue for the potential of affect and the negative affects of monstrous-femininity, as well as the performative force of queerness and its close relation to monstrosity. Thus, the sub-question I answer in this chapter is: how do the academic discourses on affect and queerness enable a rethinking of the monstrous-feminine in which its affective and queer potential can be explored?

### 2.1 Expanding the monstrous-feminine

To start this chapter, I want to call attention to inclusive language, as part of my critique of the discourse on monstrous-femininity. The monstrous-feminine – and thus also my writing throughout Chapter 1 – is rooted in a binary way of thinking about man versus woman. While being aware of the timeframe in which *The Monstrous-Feminine* was written, the 1990s, contemporary society proves a time in which this binary thinking no longer must be the only way of approaching gender. For example, not all women have a vulva and not all men have a penis. I believe the monstrous-feminine, thus, could do with a somewhat updated vocabulary and interpretative framework.

For this purpose, I highlight American gender and queer theorist Jack Halberstam’s discussion of monstrosity. Researching both Gothic and contemporary monstrosity, Halberstam analyses how “[w]ithin the history of embodied deviance, monsters always combine the markings of a plurality of

differences.”<sup>91</sup> Therefore, as Halberstam argues, the monster is a figure that can embody an intersection of subject positions considered as deviant, such as in gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality.<sup>92</sup> Building on what Halberstam here argues, one can imagine how an accumulation of multiple of these subject positions can create a larger monstrosity: the more different from the norm, the more monstrous one might be considered. Additionally, Halberstam raises how binary thinking, such as the binary present in the monstrous-feminine, “avoids the possibility of a more radical and possible queer gaze.”<sup>93</sup> Opening up the possibility to consider difference in a more intersectional framework, it becomes clear how monstrosity can be constructed due to an intersection of various deviant – or monstrous – subject positions, in which not only the gender essentialist elements of monstrous-femininity create monstrosity.

In this chapter, I lay the groundwork for this more inclusive framework, by considering the notions of affect and queerness. This way, I attempt to simultaneously specify and open up the concept of the monstrous-feminine. Rather than focusing on the bodily, cisgender female, specifics of monstrous-femininity, I emphasise the emotional or affective potential it holds and its close relations to the idea of queerness. I aim to provide space for a rethinking of monstrous-femininity, in which its gender essentialist elements do not take centre stage but are only acknowledged as the roots from which the concept was established.

## 2.2 Affect

In this section, I analyse how a focus on the affective dimensions of monstrous-femininity opens up the space to consider new models for understanding the monstrous-feminine and how the monstrous-feminine holds an affective potential. More specifically, I argue for this potential being related to performativity, making it not only tied to the horror film but also to other art practices such as performance. Here, I refer mainly to Sara Ahmed, to explain my understanding of affect, as well as monstrous-feminine-scholars Elizabeth Cowie and Pisters, to consider the meaning of affect for monstrous-femininity.

As I explored in Chapter 1, the idea of monstrous-femininity seems to have sprouted from a certain fear of women, women’s sexuality, and women’s genitalia. Foundationally, thus, the monstrous-feminine is rooted in affective workings: affects such as fear and disgust have informed the consideration of women as monstrous. The notions of affect and emotion prove valuable to

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<sup>91</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 69.

<sup>92</sup> Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 73.

<sup>93</sup> Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 157.

deepen because the affective workings of monstrosity offer a gateway to explore a possible subversion of the negativity attached to monstrosity and, thus, support my argument for the potential of performing monstrous-femininity.

### 2.2.1 Affect theory

To position the monstrous-feminine in affect theory, I follow Ahmed's definition of affect and emotion, as elaborated on in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Quoting Ahmed, "[e]motions [...] involve bodily processes of affecting and being affected, or [...], emotions are a matter of how we come into contact with objects and others."<sup>94</sup> Here, Ahmed emphasises how emotions both shape our individual and our collective experiences in the world.<sup>95</sup> Thus, Ahmed considers emotions as physically impactful and as a way of connecting with other bodies and objects.

In her work, Ahmed reflects on the discourse on affect theory, in which academics take on varying standpoints on the exact definition of the term affect and often focus on the difference between affect and emotion.<sup>96</sup> In contrast to other affect theorists, Ahmed argues that emotion and affect need not be considered as two different notions or experiences.<sup>97</sup> By not considering emotion and affect as different, Ahmed emphasises both how and by what we might be affected as individuals and how these affects might become shared perceptions in a more collective experience.<sup>98</sup>

To deepen the understanding of affect and the collective feeling it may bring about, as well as to argue for a political value it holds, Ahmed disentangles "how emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies."<sup>99</sup> Thus, Ahmed's work dives into how emotions circulate between bodies: how they "'stick' as well as move."<sup>100</sup> These motions of emotions shape Ahmed's understanding of affective economies. This shared quality of emotion is valuable for the, by Ahmed drawn, relation between emotions and politics and world-making. By referring to feminist and queer scholars such as Butler, Lauren Berlant, and Wendy Brown, Ahmed explains how

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<sup>94</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 208.

<sup>95</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 207.

<sup>96</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 205-11.

<sup>97</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 207-8.

Throughout this thesis, I still use the term affect, even though I am in agreement with Ahmed on the (lack of) difference between emotion and affect. By using the term affect I am able to refer to a larger discourse since other authors I quote *do* primarily use the word affect in their work. I, however, always follow Ahmed's definition, since she is the main inspirator for my entry into affect theory.

<sup>98</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 208.

<sup>99</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 1.

<sup>100</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 4.

“emotions ‘matter’ for politics; emotions show us how power shapes the very surface of bodies as well as worlds.”<sup>101</sup> So, Ahmed’s work emphasises how emotions can *do* something politically.

### 2.2.2 The ‘stickiness’ of affect

As Ahmed already hints at, affect has been an important aspect of feminist politics. Emotions such as pain, anger, and hate have proven crucial throughout feminist theory and activism.<sup>102</sup> Ahmed observes that emotions in general are often associated with women.<sup>103</sup> Also, gender theorist Anu Koivunen – to whom Ahmed refers – has stated that “in feminist criticism, the interest in affect has in a sense a long history: the conceptual links between woman, body and emotion is a recurrent issue.”<sup>104</sup> This research’s consideration of affect in relation to the monstrous-feminine, thus, builds further on an academic discourse in which the relation between feminist theory and affect has already been established.

Additionally, even though Ahmed does not touch upon artistic practice in relation to affect, she does bring forward the performativity of affect, in addition to how others have argued that the realm of art specifically suitable to discuss matters of affect. Building on her idea of affective economies, Ahmed describes that some objects of emotion – meaning all things and beings with which we, as the subject of emotion, come into contact – “become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension.”<sup>105</sup> To explain, Ahmed states that “signs become sticky through repetition; if a word is used in a certain way, again and again, then that ‘use’ *becomes* intrinsic.”<sup>106</sup> This ‘stickiness’ is also described by Butler as how “boundary, fixity and surface” are produced through the repetition of norms.<sup>107</sup> As Butler and Ahmed argue, due to a durational and repetitive attachment of certain affects to certain objects, those objects become full of these affects.<sup>108</sup>

The performativity of affect lies in this durational and repetitive temporality. This stickiness of affects to signs becomes visible in the present due to repetition and duration in the past until now

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<sup>101</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 12.

<sup>102</sup> In addition to Ahmed, this is, for example, argued for by Traci West in *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (1999).

<sup>103</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 205.

<sup>104</sup> Anu Koivunen, “Preface: An Affective Turn?,” in *Affective Encounters: Rethinking Embodiment in Feminist Media Studies*, ed. Anu Koivunen and Susanna Paasonen (Turku: University of Turku, 2001), 1.

<sup>105</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 11.

<sup>106</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 91, emphasis in the original.

Ahmed argues how, for example, it is difficult to hear the word ‘Paki’ without considering it insulting, due to the repetitive action of uttering it in a negative context. This word also becomes an insult through association with other negative words, such as immigrant or outsider.

<sup>107</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 9.

<sup>108</sup> Highlighting the relation between the monstrous-feminine and affect, I imagine that the creation of images of monstrous-femininity can be explained through theories of affect. Due to a long-lasting generation of negative affects, emotions such as fear and anger have been attached to the female body, creating monstrous-femininity.

but it also influences the future, since it might constitute a “‘blockage’: it stops the word moving or acquiring new value.”<sup>109</sup> This inclusion of past and future into stickiness, for Ahmed, constitutes its performativity. Namely, Ahmed, drawing on Butler’s understanding of performativity, states that “the performative is futural; it generates effects in the constitution or materialisation of that which is ‘not yet’. But, on the other hand, performativity depends upon the sedimentation of the past.”<sup>110</sup> How emotions ‘stick’ to bodies, thus, showcases a temporality and performativity, influenced by the past but also holding the potential to influence the future.

Additionally, providing support for the value of affect for art, Cowie quotes philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, who state that artists are “presenters of affects, the inventors and creators of affects. They not only create them in their work, they give them to us and make us become with them, they draw us into the compound.”<sup>111</sup> Thus, Deleuze and Guattari argue for a close relationship between art and affect. Therefore, in addition to the performativity and temporality of affect, art practices, among which performance, are valuable to look at through the framework of affect, to analyse the stickiness but also the futural potential of the affects created and employed. So, looking at the monstrous-feminine in performance concerning affect, which I do hereafter, provides a valuable framework to consider how monstrous-femininity can cite and critique affects attached to monstrosity but can also propose new affects that hand new meaning to monstrosity.

### 2.2.3 The monstrous-feminine and affect

Even though Creed does not mention affect, her analyses open up space for considering affective experience. As Chare, Hoorn, and Yue bring to the light, “Creed is highly attentive to what might now be referred to as the affective dimension to the horror film experience.”<sup>112</sup> The Kristevan framework Creed employs additionally emphasises the possibility for considering affect: Kristeva’s semiotic approach, in which she deems rhythm and tone valuable for understanding language and signs, opens up space for emotions in its focus on (emotional) drives as the underlayer of signification.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, the affective and sub-narrative dimensions of the monstrous-feminine are elaborated

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<sup>109</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 92

<sup>110</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 92-3.

<sup>111</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 175.

<sup>112</sup> Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, “Re-Reading *The Monstrous-Feminine*,” 10.

<sup>113</sup> Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, “Re-Reading *The Monstrous-Feminine*,” 10.

Interestingly, as Creed analyses, Kristeva places the semiotic, which is thus focused on a more emotional way of meaning-making, “on the side of femininity and symbolic language on the side of masculinity,” which, once again, proves the connection made between women and emotions. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 38.

on by Pisters and Cowie in *Re-Reading the Monstrous-Feminine*. These two authors provide a starting point to consider the relationship between affect and the monstrous-feminine. Hereafter, I expand on this relation and consider the affective potential of monstrous-femininity.

Affects – such as fear, disgust, but also fascination – are evoked by monstrous-femininity. An important concept that showcases this affective response, similar to the visceral affect as described by Ahmed, is Creed's *fifth look*, in which the viewing subject is forced to engage in "the act of 'looking away'."<sup>114</sup> This act of looking away happens when the viewer is not able to look because of the terrifying, confronting, and abject horror shown to the spectator.<sup>115</sup> Chare, Hoorn, and Yue analyse how this fifth look describes a feeling rather than a sign.<sup>116</sup> Thus, it might be considered an affective experience, in which the spectator is strongly viscerally addressed.

Cowie describes the other affective side of this fifth look; another affective looking relation caused by horror. She describes the "compulsive return to look, to watch, to know what we dread, snare us in the uncanny, and in the pleasure/unpleasure of repetition."<sup>117</sup> Analysing these two ways of addressing the viewer makes clear how, as the abject already described, the affective workings of monstrosity both repel and attract: it is simultaneously both horrifying and fascinating. The spectator both cannot bear to look and needs to look at the horror of the monstrous-feminine.

Affect can also be considered closely related to the abject. Cowie hands us a description of affects as "our experiences of the world, how we are touched by the world, viscerally as hot or cold, or fainting at the sight of blood, but also as we are touched by the coldness of a stare or the warmth of a gaze that we receive."<sup>118</sup> Here, the more physical and visceral impact of affect is highlighted. This addition to this research's definition of affect closely relates to the visceral qualities of the abject: how abjection at work "'made me sick' or 'scared the shit out of me'," as Creed describes.<sup>119</sup> Affect is thus closely tied to the abject and the visceral qualities the abject is able to provoke.

Furthermore, Cowie argues how horror evokes an empathic dimension which invites the viewer to engage in "an action of felt being."<sup>120</sup> This empathic experience makes the spectator identify, thinking "that could be me."<sup>121</sup> Because of this empathic response, Cowie proposes that a

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<sup>114</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 29.

Creed describes the other four looks as follows: "The three main 'looks' which have been theorized in relation to the screen-spectator relationship are: the camera's look at the pro-filmic event; the look of the character(s) in the diegesis; and the look of the spectator at the events on the screen. In his discussion of pornography Paul Willemen (1980) has specified a fourth look, the possibility of the viewer being overlooked while engaged in the act of looking at something he or she is not supposed to look at."

<sup>115</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 154.

<sup>116</sup> Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, "Re-Reading *The Monstrous-Feminine*," 10.

<sup>117</sup> Cowie, "Feminism, Film, and Theory," 77-8.

<sup>118</sup> Cowie, "Feminism, Film, and Theory," 75.

<sup>119</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 10.

<sup>120</sup> Cowie, "Feminism, Film, and Theory," 75.

<sup>121</sup> Cowie, "Feminism, Film, and Theory," 75.

feminist dimension might be evoked through the affective engagement of a film.<sup>122</sup> Chare, Hoorn, and Yue determine a similar potential of the abject as they describe how “[m]oments of abjection [...] enact a de-differentiation at the level of sex. In this sense, they open a space for sidestepping existing signifying regimes and embracing sexual creativity.”<sup>123</sup> By being thrown back towards the abject through the confrontation with the affective, this emphatic response invites the spectator to reconsider established norms, for example concerning sexual difference.

Pisters highlights a different emotional experience in response to horror film. Looking at contemporary horror films directed by women, Pisters analyses how these films are able to extend the affective spectrum of monstrous-femininity.<sup>124</sup> Namely, as Pisters analyses, in these films, monstrous-femininity is portrayed as moving beyond merely evoking fear or disgust.<sup>125</sup> Pisters substantiates this argument through an analysis of the form, affect, and meaning of blood in the aesthetics of horror. Pisters reflects on how female directors employ more female agency in their horror films, opening up “new perspectives on ‘female monstrosity’ as abject or/and castrating.”<sup>126</sup> To explain, Pisters, analyses how the 2013 remake of the classic horror movie *Carrie* (1976), directed by female director Kimberly Pierce, showcases fears and anxieties also from the women’s perspective – instead of only from an erotic male gaze – and monstrous supernatural forces as something that can be learned and practiced – instead of something uncontrollable.<sup>127</sup> Resultantly, horror films with more feminine-focused perspectives are able to affect their audience with a wider affective spectrum.

To conclude, affect theory shows how emotions both shape our individual and our collective experiences and how emotions ‘stick’ to and move between objects, as elaborated on by Ahmed. Further, this research’s association of affect with art and women builds on a longer existing discourse, in which the common connotation of women and emotion has been put to use productively instead of being considered as a negative attribute. In relation to the monstrous-feminine, affect helps to understand how negative affects have influenced the monstrosity attached to the feminine but also how an engagement with the affective force of monstrous-femininity can invite the spectator to think differently and have a different, perhaps more positive, affective experience.

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<sup>122</sup> Cowie, “Feminism, Film, and Theory,” 79.

<sup>123</sup> Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, “Re-Reading *The Monstrous-Feminine*,” 12.

<sup>124</sup> Pisters, “Carrie’s Sisters,” 127.

<sup>125</sup> Pisters, “Carrie’s Sisters,” 122, 127-8.

<sup>126</sup> Pisters, “Carrie’s Sisters,” 122, 124-5.

<sup>127</sup> Pisters, “Carrie’s Sisters,” 123-4.

## 2.3 Queerness

In addition to highlighting the affective workings of monstrous-femininity, I argue for the monstrous-feminine as holding a queer, subversive potential. Drawing on authors such as Sedgwick, Butler, and Muñoz, this section explores the definition and potentiality of queerness and relates queerness to monstrous-femininity. Queer is a term that has known a negative meaning.<sup>128</sup> However, many authors have noted how queerness holds a performative and subversive potential and I highlight how this potential is particularly valuable in instances where the monstrous-feminine is employed.

To elaborate on the term queer, Sedgwick, one of the founders of queer theory, proposes an open definition of queerness: queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.”<sup>129</sup> Sedgwick elaborates on the multiplicity of the word queer and adds how “race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourse.”<sup>130</sup> This intersectional definition of queerness forms the starting point for this section's exploration of the queer potential of the monstrous-feminine.

### 2.3.1 The subversive quality and potential of queerness

To elaborate on queerness, Butler describes how the negatively connoted term queer has been used in a subversive manner. She states how “an occupation or reterritorialization of a term that has been used to abject a population can become the site of resistance, the possibility of an enabling social and political resignification.”<sup>131</sup> This way, Butler describes a practice of resignification in which the term queer is reversed, moving towards an affirmative instead of a negative or painful meaning.<sup>132</sup>

This subversive quality can be further explored through the notions of futurity and potentiality, as discussed by Muñoz. In his book *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz explores the term queer futurity. Muñoz states that

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<sup>128</sup> Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” 9.

To elaborate, Butler explains the definition of queer in the past as follows: “‘queer’ did not yet mean homosexual, but it did encompass an array of meanings associated with the deviation from normalcy which might well include the sexual. Its meanings include: of obscure origin, the state of feeling ill or bad, not straight, obscure, perverse, eccentric. As a verb-form, ‘to queer’ has a history of meaning: to quiz or ridicule, to puzzle, but also, to swindle and to cheat.”

Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 130.

<sup>129</sup> Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” 8.

<sup>130</sup> Sedgwick “Queer and Now,” 9.

<sup>131</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 176.

<sup>132</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 169.



[q]ueerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.<sup>133</sup>

Queerness, as Muñoz here proclaims, thus has to do with a rejection of the here and now and a focus on potentiality.<sup>134</sup> Reflecting on the definition of queerness, this rejection also comes into being through being at odds with the norm.<sup>135</sup> Queer and queer futurity, therefore, can be understood as subversive and critical terms, created from a perspective of non-normativity.

To reflect on the notion of queer futurity and to clarify the idea of queer potential, Muñoz's distinction between possibilities and potentialities is valuable. He argues that possibilities exist in the now, but "[p]otentialities are different in that although they are present, they do not exist in present things. Thus, potentialities have a temporality that is not in the present but, more nearly, in the horizon, which we can understand as futurity."<sup>136</sup> Potentiality thus notes a focus on temporality and the future. Here, we see the terms queer and potentiality conjoin: both denote a focus on the future and on how we might imagine the future differently. The term *queer potential*, thus, serves to note how queerness enables a rethinking of the here and now in favour of a focus on the future.

Furthermore, Muñoz proclaims that "[q]ueerness might signal a certain belonging through and with negativity," drawing a connection between affect and queerness.<sup>137</sup> Drawing on Virno, Muñoz highlights the potential of this negativity.<sup>138</sup> In *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Virno explains how "bad sentiments" can be called on to transcend a state of hopelessness.<sup>139</sup> In his elaboration on Virno, Muñoz states that there is a "potentiality in the negative affects that can be reshaped by negation and made to work in the service of enacting a mode of critical possibility."<sup>140</sup> Thus, Muñoz

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<sup>133</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

<sup>134</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

<sup>135</sup> Queer and feminist scholar bell hooks has also, for example, stated how we should understand queerness "not as being about who you're having sex with [...]; but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent, create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live." bell hooks, "Are You Still a Slave?: Liberating the Black Female Body," a conversation with bell hooks, Marci Blackman, Shola Lynch, and Janet Mock, *The New School*, New York, May 6, 2014, accessed January 22, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJk0hNROvzs>.

<sup>136</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 99.

<sup>137</sup> José Esteban Muñoz in Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, "Hope and hopelessness: A dialogue," *Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 19, no. 2 (2009): 281, DOI: 10.1080/07407700903064946.

<sup>138</sup> Muñoz claims that he is not focused on a "certain romance of negativity," but that he also does not want to reject the negative completely.

Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 12.

<sup>139</sup> To contextualise, Virno reflects on the post-Fordist emotional state and the presence of negative emotions caused by capitalism in the working class in the 1960s and 70s. Virno's whole argumentation exceeds the scope but also the thematics of this research, so, I only refer to his approach to the potential of negativity.

Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude*, 84.

<sup>140</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 12.

proposes the possibility of considering negativity – and the negative affects attached to the term queer and queer people – as a resource for queer utopianism.

In this connection between queerness and negative affects, Muñoz has built on authors Sedgwick and Butler. First, Sedgwick proposes how queerness has a performativity to it, by stating that queerness can be considered “a strategy for the production of meaning and being.”<sup>141</sup> Second, Butler builds on Sedgwick and states that this force of the word queer comes into being “precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult,” which shows how the foundation for Muñoz to argue for the potential of negativity.<sup>142</sup> Here, the overlap between queerness and affect becomes clear: precisely those negative affects related to queerness give it its powerful force. The performativity of the word queer, as argued by Sedgwick, Butler, and Muñoz, highlights how queerness is a *doing*.<sup>143</sup> Queerness, thus, has a performative quality and a potential: it might result in criticality towards the here and now and potentiality directed towards the future.

### 2.3.2 The monstrous-feminine and its queerness

This section explores the connections between queerness and monstrous-femininity. In the following, I build further on my critique on the binary present in the discourse on the monstrous-feminine as elaborated on before. To move beyond this binary thinking, I look at openings for considering queerness in relation the monstrous-feminine, since queerness highlights the value of being different and holds the potential to subvert the negativity the monstrous-feminine carries.

Both Creed’s work and reflections on her writing propose a connection to this non-binary approach. Namely, Chare, Hoorn, and Yue state that Creed’s “interpretative framework [...] is able to open valuable spaces for the recognition of identities within horror cinema that are gender variant,” thus opening up the possibility for moving beyond a binary mode of thinking.<sup>144</sup> Chare, Hoorn, and Yue argue that, especially through the concept of the fifth look, Creed opens up the possibility for understanding the affective and subversive potential the monstrous-feminine holds.<sup>145</sup> Thus, the monstrous-feminine can be seen as a subversive figure that creates the potential for non-essentialism and subversive queerness.

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<sup>141</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 61.

<sup>142</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 172.

<sup>143</sup> A similar argument is made by Ann Cvetkovich, when she states that we might “depathologize negative feelings so that they can be seen as a possible resource for political action.”

Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: a public feeling* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 2.

Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

<sup>144</sup> Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, “Re-Reading *The Monstrous-Feminine*,” 7.

<sup>145</sup> Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, “Re-Reading *The Monstrous-Feminine*,” 11.

Additionally, both Butler and Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare, in their work *Abject Visions*, consider abjection – a key element in monstrous-femininity – in relation to queerness. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler highlights how the process of abjection creates bodies that do or do not matter: the abject bodies do not matter.<sup>146</sup> As Butler describes, queerness gets abjected from society, as a strategy to remove the ‘threat’ of queerness towards the heterosexual.<sup>147</sup> Butler argues for a resignification of the term abjection to highlight its political significance: this political agency of abjection can aid to shift the meaning of what is considered a valuable body.<sup>148</sup> Arya and Chare build further on Butler’s argumentation. They state that the abject holds a political potential, in which abject art expresses a radical sexual politics.<sup>149</sup> Similar to queerness, abject art can, as Arya and Chare describe, “reshape the social conditions from out of which it emerges.”<sup>150</sup> Abjection can, thus, challenge the situation of the here and now – the status quo – in a similar way to queerness. Therefore, as both Butler and Arya and Chare bring forward, abjection shows a similar potential as the subversive quality of queerness.

To conclude, looking at the monstrous-feminine from a perspective of queer studies shows how monstrous-femininity might hold a subversive performative potential. Muñoz’s queer futurity, building on Butler’s subversive quality and Sedgwick’s performativity of queerness, shows how queer holds the capacity to critically question the here and now and propose a *doing* towards the future. Sedgwick’s intersectional definition of queerness, in addition to Halberstam’s intersectional understanding of monstrosity which is proposed at the start of this chapter, further demonstrates how monstrosity encapsulates multiple layers of meaning and difference. Last, the abject’s close relation to queerness further strengthens the queer potential of the monstrous-feminine.

## 2.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter discussed affect and queer theory, to research how the monstrous-feminine holds an affective and queer potential. Through this potential, the negativity attached to monstrosity can be renegotiated and rethought. Having drawn on theories of Ahmed, Pisters, and Cowie, the affective workings of the monstrous-feminine and its affective performativity have been mapped. Looking at queerness through Sedgwick, Butler, and Muñoz, the monstrous-feminine has been established as a queer figure who can invite the spectator to rethink the negatively considered abjection it creates. As

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<sup>146</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, xiii.

<sup>147</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, xiii.

<sup>148</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, xxix.

<sup>149</sup> Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare, *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), DOI: 10.7228/manchester/9780719096280.001.0001, 12.

<sup>150</sup> Arya and Chare, *Abject Visions*, 12.

Halberstam and Sedgwick both have put forward, an intersectional approach to monstrosity and queerness proves crucial for this process.

In this chapter, I demonstrated how affect and queerness show many similarities and support each other in their performative force and potential for rethinking the here and now. By relating theories on affect and queerness to the monstrous-feminine, it becomes highlighted how this figure considered as monstrous and deviant can cause a rethinking of established beliefs in the spectator that encounters it. Being confronted with abjection, with the fifth look, or with the negative queerness of the monstrous-feminine, the spectator is invited to critically question the here and now. In the following chapter, I will discuss the performance case studies *TANZ*, *JEZEBEL*, and *HATE ME*, *TENDER*, to research how this affective and queer potential is touched upon in performances that deal with monstrous-femininity.

The monstrous-feminine has many faces given to her by patriarchal ideology – castrator, witch, lesbian, abject womb, mad mother, menstruating monster, etc. But as I have said, many artists and film-makers have turned that around. Barbara Creed, *Re-Reading the Monstrous Feminine* (2020), 102

### Chapter 3: The affective and queer potential of the monstrous-feminine in *TANZ*, *JEZEBEL*, and *HATE ME, TENDER*

After looking at the discourse on the monstrous-feminine in film and performance and the discourses on affect and queerness in the previous two chapters, this chapter moves to concept-based analyses of the performances *TANZ*, *JEZEBEL*, and *HATE ME, TENDER*. Throughout, I look at how these three performances relate to monstrous-femininity as proposed by Creed, for which I refer to the monstrous-feminine's elements of sexuality, motherhood, animality, abjection, and ambiguity. By describing and analysing specific performative elements, I analyse how affect is put to work and how we might understand the monstrous-feminine in these performance as holding an affective and queer, subversive potential. For this motion into performance analysis, I follow Bal's notion of travelling concepts, in which concepts are considered miniature theories that both give meaning to and are given meaning to the different contexts in which they are employed. By employing the film-based concept of the monstrous-feminine in performance, I, thus, perform this travelling motion and explore the new meanings that performance can give to monstrous-femininity. This chapter answers the following sub-question: how might *TANZ* by Florentina Holzinger, *HATE ME, TENDER* by Teresa Vittucci, and *JEZEBEL* by Cherish Menzo subvert the negative affects of the monstrous-feminine and evoke a queer way of understanding the monstrous-feminine?

#### 3.1 Performances

First, *TANZ* is a performance by Holzinger, in which ten performers perform a restaging of the classical ballet *Les Sylphides* (1909), composed by Frédéric Chopin and choreographed by Michel Fokine. Spanning a duration of over two hours, this performance includes elements of ballet performance and class, as well as elements of circus, stunting, and freakshows, executed by the all female group of performers, who are naked most of the time. Following the build-up of a ballet, the performance is divided into two acts, with a spoken intermezzo by Holzinger connecting the two acts. Regarding *TANZ*, I focus on three scenes: the re-enactment of a ballet class by undressing performers who are sexualised by the 79-year old performer Beatrice Cordua, Cordua fake birthing a fake rat

while playing a sexual rap song, and the piercing of one of the performers in their back with hooks and the following suspension act in which the performer is hanging in the air attached to these hooks.

Second, *HATE ME, TENDER* is a solo performance by Vittucci.<sup>151</sup> Subtitled “a solo for future feminism,” this work, in Vittucci’s words, “scrutinises one of the culturally most important female figures: the Virgin Mary.”<sup>152</sup> In this 50-minute performance, Vittucci speaks monologues and moves over the stage, on which a smaller square is lit using six lamps on the floor. A see-through vase filled with white sand and a blue flower, a small bundle of leaves, and a long stalk with leaves is visible, as well as a red see-through cloth that covers the body of Vittucci, on which dark brown lines and white and light brown sections are painted. My analysis focuses on how Vittucci discusses and plays with virginity and works with self-wounding by slapping a bundle of leaves on their own back.

Third, *JEZEBEL* is a physical performance by Menzo. *JEZEBEL* explores the representation of the stereotype of the video vixen, which are “female models who appeared in hip hop video clips in the late ’90s and early ’00s,” as Menzo explains in the accompanying text of *JEZEBEL*.<sup>153</sup> By using rap, hip hop music, video projections, twerking movement, a self-made *lowrider bike*, long fake nails, a fur coat, and a silver blow-up suit, *JEZEBEL* plays with ambiguity between femininity, masculinity, and animality and with the depiction of Black women as sexual object. To support the analysis of *JEZEBEL*, I draw the work of race and media scholar Murali Balaji and of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins to specify the understanding of the video vixen and its potential for Black female empowerment.<sup>154</sup> Throughout, I look at how Menzo plays with the repetition of sexualised movements and the exaggeration of monstrosity and animality by using her long nails and rapping sexual songs.

### 3.2 Sexuality

All three performances explore sexuality and, as I analysed in Chapter 1, sexuality plays a key role in understanding monstrous-femininity. As Creed describes, the monstrous-feminine originates from a way of looking “which has defined women’s sexuality as the source of all evil.”<sup>155</sup> Therefore, the

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<sup>151</sup> Vittucci uses both the pronouns she and they, which will be used alternately throughout this analysis.

<sup>152</sup> “HATE ME, TENDER,” Teresa Vittucci, accessed May 26, 2022, <https://teresavittucci.com/hate-me-tender.html>.

<sup>153</sup> “JEZEBEL (2019),” GRIP, accessed May 26, 2022, <https://www.grip.house/en/productie/jezebel/>.

<sup>154</sup> Murali Balaji, “Vixen Resistin’: Redefining Black Womanhood in Hip-Hop Music Videos,” *Journal of Black Studies* 41, no. 1 (September 2010): 5-20, DOI: 10.1177/0021934708325377.

Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>155</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 14.

monstrous-feminine has been defined “primarily in relation to her sexuality.”<sup>156</sup> To bring Creed’s key arguments back into attention, Creed argues that “those images which define woman as monstrous in relation to her reproductive functions work to reinforce the phallogentric notion that female sexuality is abject. On the other hand, the notion of the monstrous-feminine challenges the view that femininity, by definition, constitutes passivity.”<sup>157</sup> In the following, I analyse how sexuality is performed within the three performances, to clarify how these performances play with expressions of sexuality to queer the patriarchal negativity that is attached to female sexuality.

Firstly, *TANZ* plays with explicit expressions of sexuality. In the beginning of *TANZ*, Cordua teaches a ballet class to five other performers. Cordua has been fully naked already from the outset, only wearing a microphone, making her elderly body visible to the audience. The performers all execute ballet exercises during which Cordua invites the performers to take their clothes off.<sup>158</sup> Upon completing the barre exercises and having become fully undressed, the performers execute the ‘grand poses’, while Cordua gives sexually explicit commentary:

And girls, you’re looking so beautiful. I think I know what it is, I think you’re just so hot and sexy! I can’t believe it, your breasts are opening up like flowers, and your nipples are as hard as concrete. [...] What is happening with your vagina, do you feel it, I feel it in my vagina, it’s glowing, it’s glowing, and it’s getting very mushy and it’s getting very open. I can hardly bear it. Oh my god, girls, I think I am dripping and I think you are also dripping, oh my god...<sup>159</sup>

As this quote shows, Cordua, being a 79-year old women, explicitly sexualises the other performers.

This scene, as well as multiple instances afterwards, refer to an explicit presence of sexuality, in which pornographic language and imagery are created and used ironically. As Creed states, “the monstrous-feminine is very much in-your-face with her sexuality,” which is here, literally, the case.<sup>160</sup> To elaborate, Cordua performs a “vagina inspection” of the other performers, which she clearly expresses as a joyful encounter for her.<sup>161</sup> After this scene, Cordua invites all performers to

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<sup>156</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 151.

<sup>157</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 151.

<sup>158</sup> Cordua, for example, says “okay girls, get rid of some clothes, it’s so hot, I have nothing on and I feel hot, so get rid of something.”

Beatrice Cordua in *TANZ*, by Florentina Holzinger, quoted from registration.

<sup>159</sup> Cordua in *TANZ*.

<sup>160</sup> Creed, “Then and Now,” 102.

<sup>161</sup> The performers are sitting on their hands and knees, with one of their legs lifted upwards, showing their vulva’s in the direction of the audience. Cordua looks and says: “this one is so innocent, it’s unreal, it’s peachy, it’s a bit peachy colour, and it’s got – I am sure it’s got a lemon taste, and I would love to lick it but I, but I, I have to go on. Oh god, this is a completely different matter. She had a few more customers, but she is in her prime time, she is glorious! I just love to stay with her, I would like to just end my life with her.. but let’s see.. incredible. This one is coming, she is coming, she is absolutely about to come, and I... I would love to come with her.”

Cordua in *TANZ*.

masturbate on stage while she provides advice on how to masturbate.<sup>162</sup> During these scenes, thus, Cordua openly expresses her sexuality and also invites the other performers to be sexual on stage. This explicit sexuality, as Creed explained, is considered monstrous. *TANZ* plays with this explicitness and, due to the multiplicity of the created sexuality, stages an absurd and ironic scene that critiques how explicit depictions of female sexuality are perceived.

The monstrosity of this scene does not only lie in the visible expression of female sexuality but also in specifically Cordua's subject position in relation to this sexuality. As explained by Jane Ussher, to whom is referred by Chare, Hoorn, and Yue and with whom they agree, "post-menopausal women are represented primarily as the crone, the hag, or the dried-up grandmother figure, her body covered and her sexuality long left behind."<sup>163</sup> Having an older naked woman explicitly express her sexuality, thus, has a subversive quality due to the association of her being a de-sexualised subject. Additionally, Cordua here portrays a lesbian sexual desire, which is by Creed explained as considered an even more monstrous female sexuality.<sup>164</sup> Because Cordua is both older and a woman, the sexualisation of the bodies of the other performers works alienating. Here, *TANZ* is, to quote Muñoz, "attentive to the past" ways how monstrous-femininity is constructed, "for the purposes of critiquing a present," creating a first potential for queering monstrous-femininity through citation and alienation of monstrous-feminine imagery.<sup>165</sup>

Second, *JEZEBEL* also works with explicit sexuality and the sexual objectification of the female body.<sup>166</sup> *JEZEBEL* does this via the stereotype of the video vixens, which are, as Balaji explains, "Black women who appear in music videos as models[,] [...] sexual commodities, represented as affirmations of a male rapper's hypersexualized manhood or as sexual 'accents' for a female

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<sup>162</sup> "Girls I have to tell you something. You never have to fake an orgasm ever again. You can do it wherever, however you want. [...] And I also want to tell you, don't feel bad about the image you need, don't feel shy about it. You know you don't have to think your boyfriend or your lover, or anybody, just think of what you need for your, you know.. excitement. And nobody knows what you think. [...] And I would advice you to one, two, or three fingers, and you go up from the top of your clit, into your vulva, and then into your vagina, and then I would put one finger in if you want to, and then let the rest do it. Girls, let's do it here." Cordua in *TANZ*.

<sup>163</sup> Jane Ussher, *Managing the monstrous feminine: regulating the reproductive body* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 118.

Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, "Part III: Introduction: Reproductive and Post-Reproductive Bodies and the Monstrous-Feminine," in *Re-Reading the Monstrous Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Nicholas Chare, Jeanette Hoorn, and Audrey Yue (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 140.

<sup>164</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 59.

<sup>165</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 18.

<sup>166</sup> In an interview, Menzo explains that the archetype of the Jezebel, to which the performance title refers, is a "symbol of hypersexuality."

Cherish Menzo quoted in Persis Bekkering, "Cherish Menzo: 'Ik heb mijn eigen woorden gevonden'," *Theater Jaarboek 2019/2020*, October 23, 2020, interview with Cherish Menzo, <https://www.theaterkrant.nl/tm-artikel/cherish-menzo-ik-heb-mijn-eigen-woorden-gevonden/>, my translation.



performer who is seeking to assert her dominance."<sup>167</sup> In her theories of monstrous-femininity, Creed does not go into specific relations of monstrosity to women of colour. However, these video are women of colour, making it important to recontextualise this negatively considered figure. In addition to Balaji, Collins describes how the negative connotations of these sexualised video vixens strengthen the negative way how women of colour are already perceived.<sup>168</sup> Furthermore, Balaji argues that the stereotype of the video vixen has laid emphasis on the physicality of Black women, at a loss of their intellectuality and their emotionality, which makes it difficult for Black women specifically to "carve a definition [of themselves] that exists outside of male domination and independent of patriarchal capitalism."<sup>169</sup> Thus, the image of the video vixen has further negatively impacted the already negative way in which women of colour are seen, highlighting only their sexuality and physicality.

*JEZEBEL* starts with Menzo entering the stage on a lowrider bike, whereafter she plays with her animalistic facial expressions, also projected on the back of the stage in close-up. After a physical scene in which Menzo moves with her fur coat and long nails, she lays on the floor with her back towards the audience, takes the microphone, and sings with a distorted, low autotuned voice:

Oochie wally wally, oochie bang bang / He really really fucked my coochie / He really really really turned me out / He really really got to gut me / He really really made me scream and shout / He really taught me how to work my body / He really taught me how to do it with my mouth / He really really really tried to hurt me / I really love his thug and gangster style.<sup>170</sup>

Menzo repeats the same lines a few times, which is a restaging of the song "Oochie Wally," a collaborative single by rapper Nas and the hip hop group Bravehearts of which the video clip and lyrics refer to the stereotypical video vixen. By singing this song in *JEZEBEL*, Menzo quotes the negative stereotype and recontextualises it into a performance staging.

After this singing scene, Menzo moves her body to the strong beat of the music, using a lot of bouncing, twerking, and curving movements, while only being dressed in a tight pink crop top and short pink pants (Fig. 2). Menzo places the long fake nails she wears close to her buttocks and vulva, as well uses them as claws in the movement sequence that follows. Menzo repeats the same actions often, creating a physical exaggeration both through the repetition of movement and through how she shows her body with fake nails and shiny tiny clothes. This way, she creates a durational scene in which the spectator can look at her body and her movements for a long time, often with her back

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<sup>167</sup> Balaji, "Vixen Resistin'," 9.

<sup>168</sup> Balaji, "Vixen Resistin'," 6.

Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 69-71, 81.

<sup>169</sup> Balaji, "Vixen Resistin'," 6, 8.

<sup>170</sup> Menzo in *JEZEBEL*.

and butt facing the audience. Here, Menzo lays the focus on her physicality, which Balaji has argued is an essential feature in the video vixen. Through the repetition and exaggeration of physical features, Menzo places the attention on sexuality and animality, and exaggerates the “deviant Black female sexuality” of the Jezebel and the video vixen.<sup>171</sup>



Figure 2. JEZEBEL by Cherish Menzo. Cherish Menzo. Photography by Bas de Brouwer.

The result of the distorted voice and the repetition of sexualised and animalistic movement is that Menzo brings about a subversion of the negative connotations the video vixen holds. Balaji argues that Black female performers have been able to take more ownership over their representation and use their Otherness as a tool for their empowerment.<sup>172</sup> This ownership and the subversion of negative representations of Black women, as discussed by Balaji, tie in with my proposed notion of the queer, affective potential of monstrous-femininity, because both ideas show how taking ownership of a negatively considered subject position and the negative affects attached to that position can cause a subversion. Likewise, Menzo has taken the negatively connoted movements and images of video vixens and has, in Butler’s words, “redeployed, twisted, queered [them] from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes.”<sup>173</sup> Namely, Menzo uses the twerking movements and rephrases a sexual rap, which are movements, images, and texts that have become ‘sticky’ with negative affects. By performing these sticky actions, while repeating the movements and using autotune, Menzo performs a queer staging of the negatively considered sexuality of video vixens.

Thus, both *TANZ* and *JEZEBEL* play with an explicit presence of female sexuality. Due to the alienating elements both performances employ, whether it is the elderly figure of Cordua expressing

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<sup>171</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 81.

<sup>172</sup> Balaji, “Vixen Resistin’,” 8.

<sup>173</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 173.

sexual and lesbian desire or Menzo autotuning a sexual rap and her durational twerk-scene, the performers take ownership of their sexuality. Both performances use the negative as, in Muñoz's words, a "resource for a certain mode of queer utopianism:" they perform the sticky affects of monstrous-femininity in an alienating way and, consequently, critique the consideration of female sexuality as monstrous.<sup>174</sup> By challenging normative sexual expressions and recontextualising female sexuality, these scenes bring forward a queering of monstrous-feminine sexuality.

### 3.3 Virginity and motherhood

In contrast to the explicit expression of sexuality or sexual objectification of *TANZ* and *JEZEBEL*, *HATE ME, TENDER* addresses sexuality through discussing virginity, by relating to the iconic virgin Mary as well as to the idea of penetration as the loss of one's virginity. Furthermore, *TANZ* explores monstrous motherhood, which is connected to monstrous-femininity and the abject, creating a bridge to afterwards discuss *JEZEBEL*'s exploration animality and ambiguity.

Firstly, virginity is discussed from the outset of *HATE ME, TENDER*, which is thematised around the idealised icon of the Virgin Mary. After the first scene of the performance, in which the audience sees Vittucci laying under a red see-through cloth and slowly moving through different poses, she starts to sing: "oh virgin pure, oh virgin pure, you're pure cause you are a virgin, you're pure cause you are a virgin."<sup>175</sup> After repeating this line several times, they invite the audience to repeatedly sing "virgin." Meanwhile, Vittucci attempts to insert the red cloth in her vagina. The vagina being penetrated for the first time is often considered the sign of a person with a vulva losing their virginity, which Creed elaborates on by stating how the vagina is considered – by Freud, among others – as a fearsome and dangerous place, causing the loss of virginity to be "subject to rigorous taboos."<sup>176</sup> Here, Vittucci places this penetration of her vagina in contrast to being chanted to as "virgin." This ironic alienation invites the spectator to be amused, in addition to having seen a reference to the monstrous qualities of virginity, evoking ambiguous affective response.

Here, Vittucci connects both monstrous and idolised elements of virginity. After concluding that the red cloth "doesn't fit" in her vagina, Vittucci starts a monologue on how she bought this fabric together with her mother.<sup>177</sup> Later, she speaks of her mother as if her mother is the Virgin Mary and her mother's son is Jesus.<sup>178</sup> In relation to motherhood, Creed proposes the archaic mother

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<sup>174</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 13.

<sup>175</sup> Teresa Vittucci in *HATE ME, TENDER*, by Teresa Vittucci, quoted from registration.

<sup>176</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 119.

<sup>177</sup> Vittucci in *HATE ME, TENDER*.

<sup>178</sup> "So my mother said to me, she said the reason why she had to be a virgin, is because otherwise her son – Jesus – would not be recognised as the Messiah he is. Was. Is. Whatever. She said there was a prophecy, so it

as a monstrous-femininity because she is the “image of the mother as sole origin of all life:” she is an abject, monstrous figure that does not need a man to create life.<sup>179</sup> The Virgin Mary is an archaic mother because she becomes pregnant without male interference and can, thus, be considered monstrous. However, the Virgin Mary has been idolised, mostly for her non-sexuality: Vittucci describes the Virgin Mary as “culturally seen as epitome of purity, innocence and perfection, icon of the compassionate woman and mourning mother.”<sup>180</sup> Vittucci, however questions these pure and innocence qualities of the Virgin Mary, firstly through the contrast of virginity and the penetrative act of inserting a cloth into a vagina and secondly through questioning the possibility of being a virgin mother.<sup>181</sup> Thus, by recontextualising the figure of the Virgin Mary into performance and questioning her idolised qualities by connecting the Virgin Mary to discussing penetration and sexuality, Vittucci seems to refer both to the monstrous and to the idolised qualities of the Virgin Mary, once again highlighting the ambiguity of the monstrous-feminine.

TANZ stages a different take on the maternal with a similar ambiguous affective response. A while into the second act, the birth of a fake rat from Cordua’s vagina is performed. Performer Renée Copraij, wearing a black cape and fake nose, opens Cordua’s legs, covers them with fake blood from a bottle, and pulls out a fake rat, while Cordua is seated in a chair (Fig. 3). Another performer films the scene from up-close and the images are projected onto screens on both sides of the stage. This scene explores monstrous motherhood and birthing, which is by Creed linked to the abject, since reproductive capacities place the birthing body close to cycles of life and death, as well as emphasise the blurring of boundaries between the inside and outside of the body.<sup>182</sup> In this scene, Cordua, who is already established as considered a desexualised old woman, gives birth to a monstrous creature. The video images show this birth from up close, enhancing the bloody, abject quality of the birth, confronting the spectator with her ability to watch the monstrosity. Therefore, in this scene, Creed’s *fifth look*, the look in which the spectator sees a horrific scene and wants to look away but also cannot look away completely, is evoked, emphasised by the close-up video projected.<sup>183</sup> This scene, thus, confronts the spectator with abject motherhood in an exaggerated staging which is difficult and disgusting to watch.

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had to be that way, you know, he is born to a virgin. So, I asked her, I said: okay but, let’s just be honest, how exactly was that possible, you know. And she said: it was a miracle.”

Vittucci in *HATE ME, TENDER*.

<sup>179</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 18, 28.

<sup>180</sup> “HATE ME, TENDER,” Teresa Vittucci.

<sup>181</sup> Namely, Vittucci says: “so, I asked her, I said: okay but, let’s just be honest, how exactly was that possible, you know. And she said: it was a miracle.”

Vittucci in *HATE ME, TENDER*.

<sup>182</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 48-9.

<sup>183</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 29.



Figure 3. *TANZ* by Florentina Holzinger. Beatrice Cordua (left) and Renée Copraij (right). Photography by Walter Bickmann.

Meanwhile, Cordua playbacks a sexual rap: “Come when I call your pussy, I just want all your pussy / Lemme remind that pussy, you know it’s mine, that pussy / Know how to find that pussy, taste sweet as wine that pussy / Licky, licky, la-la, I’m goin’ down there / Got my face in sticky places, go to town, yeah (yah).”<sup>184</sup> With this playback act, *TANZ* invites a criticality in its staging of monstrous-femininity. Namely, Cordua’s enthusiastically playbacks this male gaze on a sexual encounter with the vulva, which is a stark contrast to the horrific birthing scene taking place, which has nothing to do with (sexual) pleasure. Furthermore, this alienation is emphasised because it is clearly shown that the visible blood is fake. Sexual pleasure and horror are performed simultaneously, inviting alienation and creating an ambiguous affective response with the spectator: it is both humorous and horrific.

Similar to the queering of female sexuality, this alienating accumulation of monstrous elements in both *TANZ* and *HATE ME, TENDER* evokes a queering. Namely, describing the critical potential of queerness, Butler explains that anti-normative presentations “will emerge as theatrical to the extent that it mimes and renders hyperbolic the discursive convention that it also reverses.”<sup>185</sup> Hence, Butler’s argument makes clear that an imitation and exaggeration of the norm can become a critique of that norm itself: the norm can be queered. In these two scenes in *TANZ* and *HATE ME, TENDER*, a similar quotation of the norm in an the staging of an accumulation of monstrous-femininity can be seen, creating an alienating and queering effect. By using contrasting elements in

<sup>184</sup> Cordua in *TANZ* (playback), quoting Jacqueses, “Inside,” featuring Trey Songz, track 9 on *4275*, Republic Records, 2018.

Additionally, an overlap with *JEZEBEL* can be analysed here. Namely, both performances employ sexual rap texts and restage them in an alienating way: via autotune and via a playback act by a 79-year old woman.

<sup>185</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 177.

an exaggerating way, these performances create subversive affect, causing an ambiguous and thus critical staging of the monstrous-feminine in relation to motherhood and virginity.

### 3.4 Animality

While *TANZ* and *HATE ME, TENDER* refer to motherhood, *JEZEBEL* plays with the animality attached to the female body and the Black female body specifically.<sup>186</sup> In the discourse on the monstrous-feminine, many relations are drawn between the female body and animality. Creed explains that this connection is related to the considered “disease of being female – an abject creature not far removed from the animal,” especially linked to the ability to give birth, which creates a “special relationship to the animal world.”<sup>187</sup> Furthermore, Balaji raises how Black women are associated with animality even more, explaining that in Western media Black women are often imagined as “the human embodiment of animal sexuality.”<sup>188</sup>

In *JEZEBEL*, this animality can be seen in costuming and physicality, as well as in references to abjection and the *vagina dentata* or vampirism. In the beginning of *JEZEBEL*, Menzo wears a large white fur coat and long fake white nails. Her physicality is quite animalistic: she moves crouched over, with a rounded back, close to the floor, without her face being clearly visible. After, Menzo plays with various positions of her long nails in relation to her face: for example, above her head – like animal ears – or dangling under her mouth – like spider legs. Simultaneously, Menzo’s face is projected live onto the back screen of the stage, creating a close-up image of her facial expressions both when she uses her nails and when she uses her tongue and mouth distortedly afterwards. The white fur coat and long nails, the animal physicality, and the play with facial expressions both with and without her nails as projected in close-up evoke animalistic associations.

Showing an instance of monstrous-femininity, Menzo holds the nails in front of her mouth for a while, creating visual similarities to a *vagina dentata* or to a vampire with fangs (Fig. 4). Creed elaborates on the *vagina dentata* and states that “all images of menacing, toothed mouths” can be considered a reference to this toothed vagina. Referring to the vampire, who – with her sharp-toothed mouth – also employs the image of a *vagina dentata*, Creed states that “[b]ecause she is not completely animal or human, because she hovers on the boundary between these two states, she

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<sup>186</sup> There are also references to animality and nature present in *TANZ* and *HATE ME, TENDER*. Namely, *HATE ME, TENDER* uses flowers and plants in the décor and as props. *TANZ* uses wolf costumes, a dance sequence they call ‘the rats’, a backdrop with forest images, and references to swans and the classical ballet *Swan Lake*.

<sup>187</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 47.

<sup>188</sup> Balaji, “Vixen Resistin’,” 6.

represents abjection.<sup>189</sup> Here, thus, Menzo's performance can be seen as referring to the abject figures of the vagina dentata and vampire.



Figure 4. JEZEBEL by Cherish Menzo. Cherish Menzo. Photography by Bas de Brouwer.

Similar to the other two performances, a subversion of this negative subject position happens because Menzo claims this position, with sexuality and animality, as her own. Towards the end of *JEZEBEL*, Menzo raps: “Fuck being tame / I rather be wild no / I don’t mind ratchet / boy this is mad shit / make sure you don’t trip / I’m a bad bitch / I’m a bitch,” after which she continues to repeat “I’m a bitch.”<sup>190</sup> Afterwards, the words she utters become gibberish, a mix of many words such as “rack it up,” “hoes,” “strippa,” “grillz,” “thug life,” “bitch,” and “fuck it up,” which are also projected on the backdrop.<sup>191</sup> She uses the negatively connoted term bitch and claims it for herself, while afterwards, due to the gibberish, she is able to estrange the meaning of these words themselves. She uses these terms that are, in Ahmed’s words, “sticky, or saturated with affect,” and recontextualises them, so they do not make sense – or the same sense – any longer.<sup>192</sup> This way, *JEZEBEL* proposes an alienation of monstrosity, through playing with the animality closely attached to the Black female body and claiming the position of bitch as her own.

### 3.5 Abjection

Next to sexuality, motherhood, and animality, abjection is a key element in these contemporary performances and their staging of monstrous-femininity. Gear argues that many feminist performances have worked with threatening “the integrity of the whole, intact body” and

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<sup>189</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 61.

<sup>190</sup> Cherish Menzo in *JEZEBEL*, by Cherish Menzo, quoted from registration.

<sup>191</sup> Menzo in *JEZEBEL*.

<sup>192</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 11.

emphasising the “body as a site for intervention and modification,” causing an ambiguous response with the viewer due to the visibility of the abject body.<sup>193</sup> Abjection and the materiality of the body are, thus, closely interrelated and important to understanding monstrous-femininity, showing “radical and often unsettling images of the body.”<sup>194</sup>

First, *HATE ME, TENDER* plays with depictions of abjection and pain. After a scene in which Vittucci moves into various poses and actions with a bundle of leaves accompanied by monotone electronic music, the music stops. Vittucci starts to hit herself on her back with the leaves repeatedly, in between which she sings “ooh” and “aah.” After a while, her expression and the tone she sings become more expressive of pain, due to her face showing signs of discomfort and the notes having a less clean tone (Fig. 5). She continues to slap herself, during which she starts to sing the lyrics “Ooh / It's so good, it's so good / It's so good, it's so good / It's so good / Ooh / Heaven knows, heaven knows / Heaven knows, heaven knows / Heaven knows / Ooh / I feel love, I feel love / I feel love, I feel love / I feel love,” quoting Donna Summer’s song “I Feel Love.”<sup>195</sup> Vittucci starts to hit herself while saying the word ‘love’, creating an ironic contrast between pain and love.



Figure 5. *HATE ME, TENDER* by Teresa Vittucci. Teresa Vittucci. Photography by Yushiko Kusano.

In this scene, Vittucci plays with the boundaries of her body and with voluntarily causing herself pain. First, only Vittucci’s front is visible but, after a while, she turns around so the audience sees the red lines of irritated skin and blood on her back that are being formed due to the repeated hitting. This way, Vittucci places the attention onto the viscosity, materiality, and vulnerability of her own body. As Gear proposes in her analysis of the work of artist Orlan, “the cutting of the flesh

<sup>193</sup> Gear, “All those womanly things,” 321, 323.

<sup>194</sup> Gear, “All those womanly things,” 321.

<sup>195</sup> Vittucci in *HATE ME, TENDER*, quoting Donna Summer, “I Feel Love,” track 8 on *I Remember Yesterday*, Universal, 1977.



creates a tension between what we perceive to be outside and inside the body.”<sup>196</sup> As Gear also explains, this opening up of the skin creates an abjection, a confrontation of the audience with their own corporeality.<sup>197</sup> Emphasised due to how blood and abjection are already considered closely to the feminine body, as Creed and Kristeva have stated, Vittucci confronts the spectator with her own physicality and the abjection happening to her body by hurting her body.<sup>198</sup>

However, this scene and the references to virginity, as discussed before, invite affective responses from the audience that are different than pain or fear. First, due to the singing of “I Feel Love,” a song which also has an iconic position for the LGBTQIA+ community, Vittucci adds a humorous layer to the painful scene of hitting herself.<sup>199</sup> Additionally, Vittucci talks about various examples related to the idea of penetration of the hymen as losing one’s virginity and becoming the object of the penetrating subject. They, for example, refer to the act of opening the packaging of a new MacBook Pro or placing a flag in the earth of a piece of land as actions to express your ownership over those objects or places.<sup>200</sup> Also, she uses one of the pink boots she wears as a visual representation of the vagina, feeling its texture, sticking her hand in it, and even inviting an audience member to put their hand inside as well. Due to these three elements, Vittucci recontextualises the original act of either hurting oneself or penetration, creating a critical perspective through the use of humour and, thus, through subversive affect.

While this scene in Vittucci’s work and the monstrous birthing scene in *TANZ* already hinted towards abjection, towards the end of *TANZ*, a scene takes place in which the spectator is confronted with a very intense abject crossing of the borders of the body, evoking intense affective responses. One of the performers, Lucifire/Lydia Darling, is pierced in her back with several hooks by fellow

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<sup>196</sup> Gear, “Nasty womanly things,” 323.

<sup>197</sup> Gear, “Nasty womanly things,” 323.

<sup>198</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 61, 81, 83.

Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 96.

<sup>199</sup> “I Feel Love,” part of the disco genre in the 1970s, was leading for the sounds of queer club culture that followed its release. Donna Summer was also a gay icon, with a large community of queer fans. Clay Cane, “Lady of the Night: Donna Summer and Her Roots in the LGBT Community,” *Advocate*, May 17, 2012, <https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/music/2012/05/17/lady-night-donna-summer-and-her-roots-lgbt-community>.

<sup>200</sup> “When you get yourself a new MacBook Pro, you know, you buy yourself a new MacBook, you take it out of the box, you have the device in your hand, and it’s surrounded by this uhmm, this plastic – what’s the name of this... wrap, plastic wrap, not wrapper!.. what’s the word I am looking for! It’s uhm – seal. Thank you. It’s surrounded by a seal, a plastic seal, and there is an opening for two fingers, exactly two fingers fit there, and you hold it.. and there is this moment where it just goes \*zzzp\* or more like \*zpz\* or more like \*kgggh\* \*zzzt\* Anyway, you know which sound I am talking about right. But then you take the seal to the side, and then you know that that MacBook Pro is yours. Ahhh. I love that feeling. Yeah... We often break things to own them, I’ve noticed. [...] You just take a stick, any kind of stick or pole, and you attach a flag to it, and then you take that whole thing, and you just kind of RAM it into the ground, you know, you just penetrate the earth a little bit, stick it in there, make sure it’s stuck. And you know what that means? It means that that land, is yours.” Vittucci in *HATE ME, TENDER*.

performer Suzn Pasyon.<sup>201</sup> A third performer with camera captures this course of action in close-up and the created images are projected on the screens on both sides of the stage. This scene, similar to the birthing scene, evokes Creed's fifth look, caused by the horror of watching the literal piercing of the human skin. Now, however, it works even stronger because it is not fake blood but real blood that comes out of the performer's body. The performer's real blood evokes abjection, confronting the audience with the, by Kristeva described, horrific "collapse of the border between inside and outside" of the body, just like in *HATE ME, TENDER*.<sup>202</sup> Showing blood, real or fake, challenges the viewing capability of the spectator and blurs the boundary between the body of the performer and the body of the spectator. Referring back to Cowie's notion of empathy in abjection, these moments invite for an empathic response in the audience that evokes a reconsideration of established beliefs, because those bodies on stage "could be me."<sup>203</sup>

After a short intermezzo-scene, Lucifire/Darling is lifted into the air, hung by the hooks that go through her human skin.<sup>204</sup> First, Lucifire/Darling is passively hanging in the air but, after a while, she starts to move with a fierce energy. The 2003 ringtone "The Crazy Frog" is turned on and all performers, including Lucifire/Darling, enter into a scene of exuberant joy and madness. Resultantly, this scene invites the spectator to engage in positive emotions, empathising with the joy the performers. Here, *TANZ* seems to take ownership of the monstrous-feminine in an active way, taking up a critical standpoint towards the negativity it carries within itself through humour. In contrast to the horror of the piercing and passive hoisting, this second half of this suspension act subverts those negative affects.

Additionally, these abjections, both in *HATE ME, TENDER* and *TANZ*, are performed abjections. As Burton states, they are "carefully self-controlled," instead of involuntarily undergone.<sup>205</sup> Thus, these moments of pain are undergone voluntarily, in full control of the performers. This way, these scenes use the negativity of the imagery, which is 'stuck' to monstrosity, in a twisted way: they explore the potential of 'sticking' with negativity, moving towards, in Ahmed's

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<sup>201</sup> During the live performances in May 2021, the performer getting pierced was Lucifire. In the, to me accessible, registration, this performer was Lydia Darling. The amount of hooks also differs per performance: in the live performance of 28 May, as well as in the registration, the performer was pierced with four hooks, while in the live performance of 29 May, she was pierced with two hooks. This scene is already predated with a scene in which one/two of the performers hoist themselves up via a rope attached to a hook in their hair.

Interestingly, the audience was warned for this scene in a trigger warning that said: "contains live piercing of bodies," which hardly covers the intensity of the depicted scene. Personally, I almost fainted when I saw this scene for the first time and it still makes me feel a little unwell, even when watching 'only' a video registration.

<sup>202</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 53.

<sup>203</sup> Cowie, "Feminism, Film, and Theory," 75.

<sup>204</sup> This kind of action is called suspension. Suspension can be characterised as a "ritualized form of body play." Often, suspensions are performed to overcome pain and achieve a feeling of euphoria or trance. It is part of the realm of body modifications.

Margo DeMello, *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 252.

<sup>205</sup> Burton, "Abject Appeal," 66.

words, how “[t]here is hope, of course, as things can get unstuck.”<sup>206</sup> Since this painful action is done from a position of ownership and is expressed with joy, the affective experience of the spectator is changed, creating the possibility for the spectator to reflect on her way of looking at monstrous-femininity: expressing a criticality through this queering affective response.

### 3.6 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I looked at the performances *TANZ*, *JEZEBEL*, and *HATE ME, TENDER*, seeing how these performances employ the monstrous-feminine and how they engage with an affective and queer potential that moves beyond the negative. In these performances, elements of monstrous-femininity came forward through sexuality, motherhood, animality, and abjection. Remembering Creed’s argument, these images of monstrous-femininity “work to reinforce the phallogentric notion that female sexuality is abject. On the other hand, the notion of the monstrous-feminine challenges the view that femininity, by definition, constitutes passivity.”<sup>207</sup> In this chapter, I built on this challenge of passivity, by considering how taking ownership and claiming the negatively considered monstrous-feminine can cause a critical stance through subversive affect. By putting the negativity to work via alienation and/or the evocation of different affects, these performances evoke a queer potential that is rooted in the performative power of the negative. This creates a queering of the monstrous-feminine and proposes a way to rethink this stereotype itself.

These performances provided a broad and deep insight into monstrous-femininity, that moves beyond how Creed has established the concept. For example, the live quality of the performance provides additional considerations to the workings of monstrous-femininity, such as in the confrontation of the spectator with blood. Additionally, the notion of the video vixen, brought into this analysis via *JEZEBEL*, shows many overlaps with monstrous-femininity but also brings forward a different discourse on Black femininity that was not yet touched upon by Creed or other scholars in a similar way. These performances, thus, invited a new and different way of looking at the monstrous-feminine than how it has been established in the existing discourse.

Throughout, I emphasised the ambiguous quality of the monstrous-feminine by highlighting the relations of the performances to affect and queerness, proposing how the monstrous-feminine holds an oppositional potential. Quoting Butler, the “goal of this analysis, then, cannot be pure subversion, as if an undermining were enough to establish and direct political struggle.”<sup>208</sup> Balaji proposes a similar statement, considering how the individuality of “someone who resists the male

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<sup>206</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 16.

<sup>207</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 151.

<sup>208</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 184.

gaze must be tempered by the fact that she is still part of, and in ways upholds, the patriarchal cultural industries.”<sup>209</sup> Butler and Balaji propose that it can be difficult to structurally change dominant structures or ways of looking through only subversion or resistance. Therefore, in this research, I have attempted to argue for both version and subversion through how *TANZ, JEZEBEL*, and *HATE ME, TENDER* claim and critique the monstrous-feminine simultaneously. The figure of the monstrous-feminine, due to its ambiguity, is especially suitable to research this two-sided potential. Performance, additionally, created a new context that highlighted liveness, presence, materiality, performativity, and ownership. By looking at the monstrous-feminine in performance through the frames of affect and queerness, I could explore the potential of performing monstrous-femininity as creating, in Muñoz’s words, “a certain affective reanimation,” to critique the durational negative way in which the monstrous-feminine has been perceived until now and to move towards a way of looking at monstrosity that highlights the oppositional, subversive, and empowering potential it holds.<sup>210</sup> This way, the monstrous-feminine can be valued for the ambiguous, subversive, affective, and queer figure it is.

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<sup>209</sup> Balaji, “Vixen Resistin’,” 17.

<sup>210</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

“Twenty-five years later, and there is still much to say. Like all true monsters, the monstrous-feminine is a tricky creature. She knows how to adapt to whatever comes her way.”

– Barbara Creed, *Re-Reading the Monstrous Feminine*, 104

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have shown that performing the monstrous-feminine holds an affective and queer potential that can evoke a subversive and oppositional understanding of monstrous-femininity. By performing the monstrous-feminine, performance makers are ‘sticking’ with the negativity of the patriarchal stereotype of the monstrous-feminine, to create the potential for subverting this negativity and creating a new affective queer staging of monstrosity. By creating new affects and working with subversive affect, the contemporary performances *TANZ*, *JEZEBEL*, and *HATE ME, TENDER* invite the spectator to rethink their view on the negative monstrosity attached to the feminine: the three performances hold an affective and queer potential that proposes a critical approach towards the here and now in service of a hopeful potential for the future that renegotiates how the monstrous-feminine is perceived. To reach this conclusion, I have answered the research question: how can performing the monstrous-feminine evoke an oppositional and affective queer understanding of female monstrosity?

Chapter 1 explored the definition of monstrous-femininity and its establishment in film and performance studies. Drawing on Creed, I explained the concept of the monstrous-feminine and described its patriarchal sources and contra-patriarchal potential. By referring to Creed’s key sources, Kristeva and Freud, two crucial elements of monstrous-femininity – namely, abjection and sexuality – have been unpacked further. A reference to the monstrous-feminine in performance studies laid the foundation for my analysis of three contemporary performances in Chapter 3 but also laid bare how little has been said on this art form concerning the monstrous-feminine so far.

Chapter 2 provided an overview of how affect and queer theory might support the contra-patriarchal potential of monstrous-feminine, two discourses of which I have selected specific elements to nourish my argumentation. Ahmed’s definition of affect as emotions that “‘stick’ as well as move,” provided fundamental insight into the functioning of the monstrous-feminine, as well in the subversion of affects it might create.<sup>211</sup> Drawing on authors Sedgwick, Butler, and Muñoz, I explored the notion of queerness and the subversive quality it holds. By referring to Virno, a strategy of sticking with negativity was unpacked. As my argument demonstrated, the performativity and temporality of affect and queerness create an opening to consider how performing the monstrous-

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<sup>211</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 4.

feminine might result in criticality towards the here and now and a queering potentiality directed towards the future.

Chapter 3 put forward the analyses of *TANZ*, *JEZEBEL*, and *HATE ME, TENDER*. In these analyses, I focused on the performance of sexuality, motherhood, virginity, animality, and abjection. These elements showed themselves as crucial relations to monstrous-femininity. By relating to these elements, I showed how the performance makers, through strategies of exaggeration and alienation, through taking ownership and adding humour, have attached new affects to their performed monstrosity: they have employed a strategy of subversive affect. By embodying the negative and patriarchal stereotype of the monstrous-feminine, these performances propose a way to put negativity to work to critique the here and now.

To establish these answers to my main research question and sub-questions, I have analysed the existing discourse on both monstrous-femininity and on queerness and affect and performed concept-based performance analyses of *TANZ*, *JEZEBEL*, and *HATE ME, TENDER*. For these concept-based performance analyses, I built on Bal's *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, in which Bal considers concepts miniature theories and argues how concepts can travel between discourses, causing both the concept and the discourse to be influenced with new meaning. Since not much research has been done on the monstrous-feminine in performance, I had to figure out this travelling motion largely on my own. Despite this, I was able to show that bringing the concept of monstrous-femininity into the context of performance studies proposes new ways of looking at monstrosity and monstrous-femininity specifically, focused on liveness, presence, physical materiality, and ownership. So, in this research, looking at contemporary performances did indeed bring new dimensions to the monstrous-feminine, which proposes that performance is a valuable way to explore the subversive potential of monstrous-femininity. To provide this, I needed not only the discourse on the monstrous-feminine but also the discourses on affect and queerness that I brought into discussion with Creed's concept, which provided critical dimensions to how the monstrous-feminine was established by other authors, focused on intersectionality and employing the negative.

To suggest further research, *TANZ*, as well as the entire oeuvre of Holzinger, provides many more openings for analysis of the monstrous-feminine. For example, *TANZ* touches upon many witch images, which is a very prevalent face of monstrous-femininity. However, since *JEZEBEL* and *HATE ME, TENDER* show less affinity with the theme of witchery, this aspect has not been highlighted. Nevertheless, the image of woman as monstrous witch remains an important facet for further research into the monstrous-feminine in contemporary performance.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> During the writing process of this thesis, I experienced the performance *Witch Hunt*, directed by Eline Arbo and performed by Noord Nederlands Toneel and Club Guy & Roni, which could provide additional case study

Additionally, an aspect that has not been brought forward in this thesis is how *JEZEBEL* and *HATE ME, TENDER* both play with the shape of body on stage. The use of a blow-up suit in *JEZEBEL* and the white and brown lines painted on Vittucci with body paint in *HATE ME, TENDER* could have done with more attention in this research. This could be explored further, to uncover how this play with formation and deformation of the body relates to monstrous-femininity, especially through relating it to the concept of masquerade, a psychoanalytic concept that relates to Creed's analysis of horror and monstrosity. Chare, Hoorn, and Yue add that masquerade can be a way to "undermine essentialist notions of gender," making it a valuable addition to explore further concerning moving beyond gender binarism in monstrous-femininity.<sup>213</sup>

During this research, I encountered Angela Jones's notion of *queer heterotopia*, a concept built on Michel Foucault's *heterotopia*. These queer heterotopia are, in Jones's words, "sites where actors, whether academics or activists, engage in what we might call a radical politics of subversion, where individuals attempt to dislocate the normative configurations of sex, gender, and sexuality through daily exploration and experimentation with crafting a queer identity."<sup>214</sup> This notion of a specific location where a radical subversion can take place could be the next step in exploring how the theatre or a performative space might be especially a suitable place for the manifestation of the affective and queer potential of monstrous-femininity.

Importantly, I wrote this thesis being a West-European white cisgender female. Being aware of this subject position, my analyses of the manifestations of monstrous-femininity are still largely coloured by this privileged position. Since Creed does not touch upon Black women or women of colour in her research, the discourse provided less attention to the influence of skin colour on the construction of monstrous-femininity. However, as Hoorn explains, when speaking about the work of the Indigenous Australian artist Destiny Deacon, the kind of work that employs multiple elements of difference is "challenging patriarchal authority through intervening at multiple levels."<sup>215</sup> A more intersectional approach could thus be analysed with more subversion. More research on the monstrous-feminine in different cultural contexts could prove meaningful, in addition to a critical comparison with matriarchal societies and their view upon femininity.

By positioning emotion and queerness at the heart of this research, I have aimed for an embrace of the association of emotion with women, building on the existing female and feminist

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material for this further research. Read more about *Witch Hunt* here: <https://nnt.nl/en/voorstelling/witch-hunt/>.

<sup>213</sup> Chare, Hoorn, and Yue, "Re-Reading *The Monstrous-Feminine*," 26.

<sup>214</sup> Angela Jones, "Queer Heterotopias: Homonormativity and the Future of Queerness," *Interalia: A Journal of Queer Studies* 4 (2009), para. 3, [https://interalia.queerstudies.pl/issues/4\\_2009/13\\_queer\\_heterotopias\\_homonormativity\\_and\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_queerness.htm](https://interalia.queerstudies.pl/issues/4_2009/13_queer_heterotopias_homonormativity_and_the_future_of_queerness.htm).

<sup>215</sup> Hoorn, "In-Your-Face," 249.

scholarship that has come before me. This research finds itself balancing on the edge between version and subversion, largely influenced by the ambiguous figure of the monstrous-feminine herself: a figure by Creed described as both horrifying and fascinating, both repulsive and fantastic.<sup>216</sup> What this research adds to the existing discourse is a critical insight into how negative stereotypes of monstrous-femininity entail a queer and affective potential when employed in performance. Additionally, since hardly any scholars have researched the monstrous-feminine in a theatre context, this research proposes the value of considering performativity in relation to monstrous-feminine images, since, for example, the liveness of the performative event brings out new definitions of and possibilities for looking at the monstrous. Additionally, I have attempted a first step in considering the monstrous-feminine in a more intersectional way, by critiquing its binary and looking at non-white monstrous-femininities. Finally, by bringing affect theory and queer theory in conversation with the existing discourse on the monstrous-feminine, I have attempted to craft a space in which the monstrous-feminine can be valued for its difference, its emotion, and its monstrosity.

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<sup>216</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 14.



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## Performances

*HATE ME, TENDER*. Concept and performance by Teresa Vittucci. ImPulsTanz Festival, Vienna, Austria, July 28, 2019. Seen at What You See Festival, Theater Kikker, Utrecht, November 19, 2021.

*JEZEBEL*. Concept, choreography, and performance by Cherish Menzo. Frascati, Amsterdam, November 5, 2019. Seen via livestream at Nederlands Theater Festival, Frascati, Amsterdam, September 5, 2020.

*TANZ*. Concept and choreography by Florentina Holzinger. Tanzquartier Wien, Vienna, Austria, October 3, 2019. Seen at Stadsschouwburg Utrecht, May 28 and 29, 2021.