

Pop! Medusa: The Reappropriation of the Gorgon in Pop Music

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the reappropriation of Medusa in pop music. It explores four different female pop stars who have either been read as, or have become, the Gorgon in their work. It shows that Medusa, a petrifying monster from Greco-Roman mythology, still resonates with modern audiences. The Gorgon's rich mythology and the unique power of her gaze have been a source of inspiration for authors and artists since antiquity, and in the early twentieth century psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud used Medusa to further outline his theory of the Oedipus Complex. In turn, Freud's Oedipus Complex and his reading of Medusa was adopted by early feminist film theorists to analyse the relationship between the image on the cinema screen and the gaze of the spectator in the audience. Essentially, these early theories posited that women onscreen are passive figures who primarily speak to the fears and desires of the male spectator. Although these theories were innovative at the time, they also had their limitations. They presented women as a homogeneous group and did not consider women's possible agency over their image, nor the diverse identities within the audience. This thesis therefore argues that there must be a return to Medusa's myth and the dynamics of the gaze, to create a more updated, inclusive, and empowering theoretical framework through which to read images of women. By using a combination of Medusa's mythology with film and queer theory to create a 'Medusa lens', this can be applied to read female pop stars who are engaging with the Gorgon and the monstrous-feminine to create their own narratives, and to manipulate their appearances to consciously attract the diverse gazes of their audience.

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Introduction

Medusa, the petrifying Gorgon from the ancient world, is a figure familiar to most in the modern day.¹ Her snake-haired visage is used in advertising, film, and fashion, and it is particularly her diverse mythology and ambivalence that has led her to become a symbol used across a variety of disciplines that include feminism, psychoanalysis, film theory, and even law. The enduring appeal of Medusa is evident in two particular examples from popular culture in recent years: the pop star Rihanna on the front cover of *GQ* (Gentleman's Quarterly) magazine (2013) and rapper Azealia Banks' music video 'Ice Princess' (2015). It is notable that both musicians are Black women, and this may point to a particular resonance with the Gorgon based on racial experience.² Yet, Medusa is used by these women in very different ways. While Rihanna is a heavily sexualised Medusa on the front page of a magazine that targets a straight male demographic, Azealia Banks becomes a violent Medusa hybrid who combines the Gorgon's mythology with Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Snow Queen* (1844) to become the titular character of her song 'Ice Princess'. The different and unique ways these female musicians are using the Gorgon points to how Medusa in popular music is an underexplored area that is ripe for analysis. This thesis therefore explores the reappropriation of the Gorgon by certain female pop stars. The term 'appropriation', which is used with the discipline classical reception, is defined by Lorna Hardwick as 'taking an image or text and using it to sanction subsequent ideas or practices (explicitly or implicitly)' (2003, 9). I use the term 'reappropriation' throughout my thesis to explore how these pop stars are building on existing reception and appropriation of the Gorgon, and how they are reclaiming Medusa as a figure who has previously been used derogatively towards women. It is a term that will be used in this study to question why these women are drawn, or compared, to this monstrous figure, and what they are 'doing' ('explicitly or implicitly') with Medusa, and why this appeals to their fans.

Rihanna and Azealia Banks use Medusa as part of their image and performance in the above examples overtly, but there are cases of pop stars who do not directly become the

¹ Medusa can also be referred to as 'the Gorgon', for she is the most famous of her Gorgon sisters: Stheno and Euryale.

² I use capital letters for 'Black' throughout, largely because it speaks to a collective cultural identity, much in the same way Asian does. I would also like to add here that I am aware of the issues of a white woman discussing personal racial issues. I have consciously tried to elevate the voices of Black women as far as possible and hope that this piece of work is useful for Black scholars who can build upon it.

Gorgon but are interpreted as such by their audience. Madonna, for example, was read as Medusa by comedienne Julie Brown in *Medusa: Dare to be Truthful* (1992), a parody of Madonna's documentary film *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (1991).³ This reading of Madonna as the Gorgon is intriguing and should be read against the first decade of the pop star's career when she emerged at a time when *MTV* (*Music Television*, released on the first of August 1981) had begun to change the face of the music business. *MTV* was a new television channel that played music videos on repeat, and it led to the music video becoming almost as important for the pop star's success as the actual song they were releasing.⁴ It was Madonna who particularly utilised this medium to enhance her star power. Courting controversy by using sex and religion, Madonna's music videos gradually became more ambitious and akin to mini films. It can therefore be inferred that Brown interpreted Madonna as Medusa because of the pop star's exuberant nature and demand to be looked at as a spectacle who fixates the gaze of her audience, as if they had indeed just witnessed the Gorgon. Throughout *Medusa: Dare to be Truthful*, Brown pokes fun at Madonna's incessant need to be the centre of attention and points to the tactics that Madonna employed to ensure that she was visually alluring to her audience.

Since *MTV*, the reliance of pop stars on their image to sell their music has become even more focalised. *YouTube* and social media platforms have increased the need for pop stars to provide visual access to their lives and performances in order to seduce fans into their brand. This has certainly been used by Lady Gaga, who rose to fame in 2008 with her single 'Just Dance'. Madonna has claimed that Gaga often copies her style of music (quoted in Macatee 2016), a claim that Gaga refutes. However, Gaga is akin to Madonna in that she is a chameleon who repeatedly changes her look, and she is also read as a Medusa figure. Unlike Madonna, however, Lady Gaga explicitly uses the monstrous in her performance, and in 2009 she created a collective identity for her fans by calling them 'Little Monsters', with fans in turn giving Gaga the title 'Mother Monster'. Gaga has created a shared monstrous identity between herself and her fans and she used social media to enhance this relationship. In March 2012, for example, Gaga introduced LittleMonsters.com, an 'invite-only social networking site for her fans', where they could buy tickets, talk to other fans, and, on special occasions

³ *Madonna: Truth or Dare* documented Madonna's *Blond Ambition* tour (thirteenth of April – fifth of August 1990) and gave fans a glimpse of the pop star on and offstage.

Madonna: Truth or Dare was known as *In Bed with Madonna* outside of North America.

⁴ The channel later broadcasted non-music video related programmes, such as reality television series *The Real World* in 1992 ('MTV Launches' 2009).

called the ‘Little Monster Mash’, to Gaga herself (Click 2013, 361). Gaga is thus an innovator who has set the precedent for the way fans and pop stars communicate using social media, and while Gaga does not explicitly become Medusa in her performances, her use of the monstrous has led some fans to create artworks that depict Gaga as the Gorgon. This fan art is certainly not meant to disparage but views Gaga as Medusa in an empowering and positive light.

It is striking that these four pop stars are connected with Medusa – a *monster* and a powerful woman deemed so threatening that she was beheaded in the Greco-Roman myths. Even in popular retellings of her myth, the Gorgon continues to be beheaded and subjugated, for example, in the films *Clash of the Titans* (1981 and its remake in 2010) and *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2010). She is also still used to demonise powerful women (for example, Hilary Clinton during the 2016 US election. See Beard 2017, 70-79), and has been used as a derogative slur directed toward Black women because of their hair which some have compared to snakes (Goodman 1996, 197).⁵ Thus, why would female pop stars willingly become Medusa and why would their audience, *their fans*, draw this comparison? It brings into question the ways Medusa is being used in modern popular culture and what she has come to symbolise, and how these female pop stars are engaging, sometimes inadvertently, with the monstrous Gorgon, and what they are trying to convey to their audience.

Thus, while this thesis studies the reappropriation of Medusa in pop music and seeks to understand why the Gorgon still resonates in the modern day, it also does more. I contend that Medusa is an apt figure through which to read modes of spectatorial identification with the image because of the unique dynamics of her gaze. Through a consideration of Medusa’s petrifying gaze and by returning to her rich mythology and reception, I argue that she can be used as a lens through which to understand how these pop stars command the gaze of their audience by drawing from, and subverting, the monstrous. This thesis proposes that these pop stars can be read as ‘modern Medusas’ who demand to be looked at by fixating the gaze of their audience and who look *back* with their own potent female gaze.⁶ Using Medusa, this

⁵ Even in popular music, Medusa has been used as a derogative slur towards women. For example, British reggae band UB40’s song ‘Madam Medusa’ (1980) was said to have been about then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Bernstein 2013).

⁶ Joey Soloway (previously Jill Soloway), a television director and writer, discussed the ‘female gaze’ while speaking at a Tiff master class in 2016 and ‘claimed’ the ‘female gaze’ as theirs, for no other writer had claimed responsibility for its creation. Soloway argued that the female gaze was created in response to Mulvey’s ‘male gaze’ (discussed below) and is a more interdisciplinary approach to critique existing images of women onscreen

thesis reveals the ways female pop stars use their images as vehicles for their success, for there is a reciprocal relationship between pop star and fan as the former relies on their audience to remain captivated by them so that they continue to buy their concert tickets, and so on. However, I also contend that there is something much more subversive at play. By creating and applying my own ‘Medusa lens’, I argue that these pop stars are not just using sex or the monster as shock tactics to appeal to their audience as spectacles but are subversively manipulating their image to reveal aspects of their personal female identities and to ‘speak’ to their diverse audience.

To create a ‘Medusa lens’, I will take an interdisciplinary approach that will combine Medusa’s rich mythology (and this includes how it continues to develop in modern times) primarily with film and gaze theory. It is important to note that Medusa was subject to a diverse set of narratives in the ancient world, with numerous ancient authors and artists developing and adapting her story. Thus, in post-antiquity, many have been drawn to various aspects of Medusa’s mythology and appropriated the parts that most suit one’s personal agenda. Important for this thesis is the way psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud used the monstrous Medusa to further outline his theory of the Oedipus Complex. Freud used Medusa to conflate women’s bodies with the monstrous and, in doing so, presented a portrayal of women that was largely a product of its time. Second wave feminist film theorists, Laura Mulvey and Teresa de Lauretis, have used Freud’s theories to argue that women onscreen are oppressed figures who exist as manifestations of men’s fears and desires. These early feminist film theorists viewed women onscreen, and indeed the women in the audience who they largely take as homogeneous, as passive participants in cinema who have very little power because they are trapped in narratives created by men. These theorists who draw directly and indirectly from Freud’s Medusa are reductive and do not provide entirely useful frameworks through which to analyse the pop stars of this thesis who, I argue, have agency and who reclaim and create their own narratives.

created by cis men and as a way of pointing towards ways in which film and television can create more diverse roles. It highlights that women can possess the gaze and reveals that women onscreen ‘see you seeing us’ and are aware of their audience (Soloway 2016). The female gaze has already been established in relation to Medusa by Susan R. Bowers in ‘Medusa and the Female Gaze’ (1990). In this piece, Bowers views Medusa’s gaze as such a threat because it is a Greek patriarchal response to her resilient power that is residual from pre-Olympian religion (Bowers 1990, 220). Bowers argues that Medusa had a ‘powerful pre-Olympian history’ where she was ‘a powerful goddess at a time when female authority was dominant’ (1990, 220). Medusa’s pre-Olympian history is beyond the scope of this paper. Also see Bevan (2020) for the gendered aspect of gazing in relation to Medusa.

To understand how Medusa's story has been appropriated to formulate key theories, it is important to return to the primary texts. Medusa, and by extension female monsters, reflect and continue to embody specific cultural fears and desires that can evolve and change. Indeed, while Freud viewed her as symbolising the monstrous female body, others such as French feminist Hélène Cixous, who I will return to below, view Medusa as a symbol of feminine power. It is not my purpose here to give a detailed account of Medusa's diverse mythology and her many receptions in post-antiquity, for there are a number of excellent works that already do this, for example Stephen R. Wilk's *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon* (2000), Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers' *The Medusa Reader* (2003), Kris Hirschmann's *Medusa* (2012), David Leeming's *Medusa: In the Mirror of Time* (2013), Daniel B. Lewis' *The Mythology of Medusa* (2015), and Deacy, Hanesworth, Hawes and Ogden's chapter 'Beheading the Gorgon' (2016). These works highlight the ways Medusa was viewed in the ancient world and how she has since been adapted to suit the needs of the artist, poet, author, theorist etc, who appropriates her. While none of these works suggest a 'Medusa lens' as such, they show how Medusa has been used as a figure through which to view, among many things, the gaze (Sartre 1943), Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (Garber 1987), the French Revolution (Hertz 1983), theology (Ebreo 1535), Judaism (Derrida 1974), and women. Thus, in keeping with the ambivalence of Medusa and how she can be applied to modern theory, by highlighting key themes from her myth(s), I will show how Medusa provides tools that I argue can be used to create a lens through which to read images of female pop stars in an empowering light.

Medusa's Myth(s)

The first mention of the Gorgon in the preserved literature is in Homer's *Iliad* (the date of this work is uncertain; Bernard Knox [1991] gives c. 725–675 BCE), although she is not yet named as Medusa. In the *Iliad*, the Gorgon adorns both the goddess Athena's (Minerva in the Roman literature) aegis and the hero Agamemnon's shield to terrify enemies on the battlefield (Homer, *Iliad* 5.733-742 and 11.32-40).⁷ It is in Hesiod's *The Shield of Heracles* and his *Theogony* (c. 700 BCE) that Medusa is named and defeated by the hero, Perseus. Hesiod provides the earliest preserved account of what has come to be the canonical version of the myth. Later ancient authors, the Greek Apollodorus in his *Bibliotheca* (second century CE) and the Roman poet Ovid in *Metamorphoses* (c. 8 CE), both draw on Hesiod as well as

⁷ Aegis means her shield or breastplate.

Pherecydes of Athens' now lost account (dated 454 BCE, a floruit given by Deacy et al 2016, 824) to give more detailed narratives.⁸ Consistently in these versions, Medusa is a monster who, if looked at, can turn one to stone. Further, as Medusa is simply a part of the hero Perseus' story, she does not have a voice.

There are, however, many versions of Medusa's tale, and several ancient authors make no mention of her visual monstrosity nor her petrifying ability in their accounts. For example, Diodorus Siculus, an ancient Greek historian, states that Medusa was an African queen, and the leader of an all-female race called the Gorgons, enemies of the famous Amazons (*Library of History* c. 60-30 BCE, 3.52.4 and 3.55.3). In another account, the ancient Greek traveller and writer, Pausanias, proposes that Medusa was not a mythical snake-haired monster, but a Libyan queen (*Description of Greece* c. 143-176 CE, 2.21.5-6). Yet, across the broad spectrum of Medusa's tale, authors repeatedly describe her as an unruly woman from Africa. Turning to Ovid, the poet states that when Perseus was flying home with the head of the serpent-locked Medusa in his bag, the blood from her seeping neck turned to snakes when it landed on Libyan soil (*Metamorphoses* 4.615-620). The monster as located outside of the civilized and ordered Greek polis (city-state) may reflect ancient Greek views of the barbarian Other, and Debbie Felton states that the hybrid monsters of this ancient world demarcated the boundaries between civilized society and uncivilized nature (2012, 103). The placement of monsters outside of society reflected the similar way foreign 'real-life' enemies were viewed as barbaric in contrast to the refined Greeks. However, as women were identified with the 'wildness of nature – defined by the Greeks as whatever existed beyond the boundaries of an ordered civilization', then it provides an explanation as to why so many of these monsters were women who were to be killed by a male hero (Felton 2012, 105). Thus, although Africa is a diverse continent inhabited by peoples of different ethnicities and races, it may partly explain why modern Black women are drawn to Medusa, and this will inform my analysis of Rihanna and Azealia Banks in chapters one and two, respectively.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will discuss the themes that emerge most explicitly in the myth as told by Apollodorus and Ovid, for these are the best-known accounts and the

⁸ We know these authors drew from Pherecydes' account because fragments of this text were recorded by an anonymous scholar.

The author of *Bibliotheca* is disputed. While it was initially thought to have been written by Apollodorus of Athens (a Greek scholar) in the second century BCE, it is now believed to have been composed in the second century CE, likely by another writer with the name Apollodorus who may have been Athenian or from eastern Greece (Hornblower 2012).

ones modern pop stars and their audiences will be most familiar, may have been inspired by, and can be read against. There are still some significant differences between the two authors' versions, and while Apollodorus drew from earlier sources quite strictly, it seems Ovid added his own unique spin on the tale.

In both accounts, Perseus is the son of the god Zeus and the princess Danaë. Apollodorus states that Acrisius, the king of Argos, was told by the oracle that his daughter (Danaë) would give birth to a boy who would kill him. To prevent the prophecy from coming true, Acrisius locks his daughter in an underground chamber, but this does not stop Zeus from visiting her as a shower of gold, and he impregnates her. Alas, Danaë conceives a child, but Acrisius refuses to believe that this is the son of a god.⁹ Thus, once the baby is born, the king locks his daughter and her child in a wooden box and casts them out to sea. Fortunately, Danaë and baby Perseus are found by the fisherman Dictys, and they settle on the island of Seriphus. At this point in Apollodorus' version, the story jumps forward in time to when Perseus has 'grown to man's estate' (*Bibliotheca* 2.4.2, trans. by J. G. Frazer, 1921). The king of Seriphus and brother of Dictys, Polydectes, has become infatuated with Danaë and, under the 'pretext of collecting contributions towards a wedding gift for Hippodamia, daughter of Oenomaus', he gathers his friends, including Perseus (Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 2.4.2). Whereas others in attendance promise to collect horses as gifts, it seems that Perseus, in youth's arrogance, claims he can return with the dreaded Medusa's head. Polydectes accepts Perseus' offer, believing the mission to be suicide, and the perfect opportunity to be rid of the young man who stands as an obstacle between himself and Danaë.

The Myth: The Gaze

This is where Perseus' adventure truly begins. The gods Hermes (Mercury) and Athena (Minerva), his half-siblings, guide him on his journey where he will first visit the Graeae, three sisters who share an eye and a tooth.¹⁰ Perseus steals their eye, and only gives it back once they have told him where he can find nymphs who possess certain magical items. Upon finding these nymphs, Perseus is bestowed the helmet of Hades, which renders the wearer invisible; sandals, which enables the wearer to fly; and a sack called a *kibisis*, where Perseus

⁹ Apollodorus also states that Perseus may have been fathered by Proetus, Danaë's uncle and Acrisius' enemy. However, this is not a widely accepted element of the story. It seems that in the tradition of other Greek heroes, Perseus is destined to be a demi-god.

¹⁰ Enyo, Pephredo, and Dino (also known collectively as the Graeae or Phorcides) are sisters of the Gorgon. Ovid, however, says that there are only two sisters and insinuates that they are the guardians of Medusa, rather than the ones who lead Perseus to the nymphs (the gifts from the nymphs is a detail omitted by Ovid) (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.773-776).

can store the head of Medusa.¹¹ Perseus is now equipped to defeat the monster, and he creeps into Medusa's lair where he finds her sleeping alongside her Gorgon sisters, Stheno and Euryale. While all three sisters, according to Apollodorus, could turn those who looked upon them to stone, it was only Medusa who was mortal and thus she was the one who could be defeated (*Bibliotheca* 2.4.2). To avoid being turned to stone, Perseus looks at Medusa in the reflection of his shield and, guided by the hand of Athena, beheads her.

Sight is a central theme throughout the myth, with Perseus particularly trying to establish his position as bearer of the look. Rainer Mack in 'Facing Down Medusa (An Aetiology of the Gaze)' states that at the beginning of his life Perseus is denied sight, for he is conceived in a dark chamber and is subsequently locked in a dark box when he is born (2002, 589). As he embarks on his quest, Perseus is constantly trying to assert his gaze, while robbing others of theirs. By first stealing the Graeae's eye, their only source of vision, he forces the Graeae to tell him where the nymphs are and who, in turn, give Perseus gifts that enable him to be visibly undetected by the Gorgons, while he can look freely. By asserting his own gaze upon Medusa via her reflection on his shield, he can defeat her without risk of being turned to stone and losing his ability to see. Although Apollodorus mentions that Medusa and her sisters turned anyone who looked at them to stone, it is accepted that it was specifically Medusa's *gaze* that held petrifying abilities. For illustration, in very early depictions of Medusa on temples, there is emphasis on her bulging eyes (for example, the Temple of Artemis, Corfu c. 580 BCE) and even on pottery (particularly vases and shallow drinking cups [*kylix*]), it is her eyes that draw you in. Thus, it may have been common knowledge in the ancient world that it was her eyes that stupefied the onlooker and that this did not necessitate specific mentioning in the literature. However, Ovid (and other later ancient authors such as Lucan in his *Pharsalia* c. 61-65) explicitly state in writing that it is Medusa's eyes that transform onlookers into stone. For example, Ovid describes how Perseus continues to use Medusa's gaze to defeat his enemies by revealing her decapitated head. During one such altercation, Perseus cries out to his allies to 'turn their faces away!' as he lifts the head to petrify his enemies (*Metamorphoses* 5.179-180). It leads his foe, Phineus, to say:

¹¹ Apollodorus also adds that Hermes supplies Perseus with an 'adamantine sickle' (*Bibliotheca* 2.4.2). This was not mentioned by an anonymous scholar that recorded much of Pherecydes' work in his copy of Apollonius of Rhodes's *Argonautica*, but may have existed in Pherecydes' original account (Gantz 1993, 306)

‘You win, Perseus’, he said. ‘Put away your monster,
Remove
your Medusa, whoever she is, with the stare which
turns us to stone...’
Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.216-217, trans. by D. Raeburn (2004).

Perseus thus appropriates Medusa’s gaze, referred to here as a ‘stare’, as if it were his own, and Ovid reveals that it was not enough for Medusa to simply look at her victim, but one must also look at the Gorgon for her power to take effect. Later in Ovid’s tale, Perseus continues to use the Gorgon’s head against his enemies and later directs Medusa’s gaze at Proetus. Proetus is his mother’s uncle and his grandfather’s brother, and Perseus reveals Medusa’s head to petrify him with the ‘terrible eyes of the snake-wreathed Gorgon’ in retribution for Proteus’ expulsion of Acrisius from his fortress (*Metamorphoses* 5.240-241).

Aside from Medusa, this play on the gaze is also found when Perseus is flying home to Seriphus over Ethiopia with the Gorgon’s head in his *kibisis*, and when he finds the princess Andromeda tied to rocks as a sacrifice to a sea monster. Her sacrifice was intended to appease the gods, after her mother Cassiope (in Ovid, Cassiopea in Apollodorus) claimed that she (Cassiope) was more beautiful than the Nereids (daughters of Neptune). Andromeda is contrasted with Medusa, for when Perseus first sees her, he almost forgets to fly and freezes as if had been looked at by the Gorgon. However, he regains control because Andromeda is not a woman who has an omnipotent gaze, but barely raises her downcast eyes. Instead, he subjects Andromeda to his gaze, picturing her as a ‘marble statue’ (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.674). Thus, Andromeda becomes Medusa’s opposite, for she is the passive virginal maiden in need of a hero. Perseus promises to defeat the sea monster if he can have Andromeda as his wife, and her father, King Cepheus, agrees. Perseus kills the sea monster (oddly, without using the Gorgon’s gaze and possibly to show that he was not solely reliant on Medusa or the gods for his heroic acts), and he marries the princess.

In this myth, there is thus a power dynamic at play between the one who looks and the one who is looked at, and it is positioned in masculine and feminine terms. The myth is about the power of vision, and it punishes a woman who possesses the gaze while glorifying the hero who steals it from her (for more on this see Bevan 2020).¹² To look at Medusa is to have

¹² While there have been many assumptions that Medusa’s power works solely on men (and beasts, according to Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.780-1), Pausanias gives an example of Medusa’s power taking effect on a woman (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 9.34.2).

her return your gaze with her own stare as she literally objectifies you, and Perseus is only able to defeat Medusa by subjecting her to his own gaze by looking at her reflection.¹³ This has led Dunstan Lowe to the following conclusion: ‘the fact that the gaze is a pleasurable act conferring power on the viewer is important for understanding the Roman Medusa, who is both fatally powerful as viewer and fatally vulnerable when viewed’ (2015, 105).¹⁴ However, there is a subtle nuance here. Medusa is only ‘fatally vulnerable’ when looked at indirectly via the male lens of Perseus’ shield. In contrast, when she is looked at directly, she is a potent threat. The complex and unique dynamics of the gaze inherent in the myth of Medusa, I argue, provide an interesting framework through which to read images of women onscreen, specifically the pop stars of this thesis. It points to the power of looking, while also acknowledges that to be looked at is not necessarily to be in a passive or subjugated position.

In modern retellings of Medusa’s myth, there is nearly always focus on her eyes and her power to turn one to stone. In the *Clash of the Titans* films (1981 and 2010), Medusa’s eyes emanate a piercing bright light as she directs her gaze toward her victim, and in *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2010) a very modern Medusa, played by actress Uma Thurman, comically wears sunglasses to prevent her from turning anyone she looks at to stone, and who dwells in a garden centre filled with her victims that take the role of stone garden ornaments. However, as Deacy et al (2016) highlight, various receivers of Medusa throughout the ages have taken different approaches to how the Gorgon’s power operates. During the Renaissance period, for example, emphasis was placed on *looking at* Medusa, who became an allegory for the beautiful woman who could stupefy men (2016, 828-829). In gaze theory, such as Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and which is discussed in further detail below, however, being *looked at* by Medusa becomes the concern, with the Gorgon becoming an allegory for the look of the Other. Such gaze theory has subsequently influenced film theory, which investigates the power dynamics of both looking and being looked at, and it is this work which will be discussed below and which my thesis builds on.

¹³ Perseus as an image-maker draws comparison with Medusa who herself is a maker of images, for she is a sculptor who creates statues with her gaze. This has led Caroline van Eck, an art historian, to interpret Medusa as Pygmalion’s (the mythical sculptor who fell in love with his self-created statue) ‘dark double’: an ‘anti-Pygmalion, petrifying where the sculptor animates’ (2016, 6–7, see Bevan 2020, 95 for more on this).

¹⁴ Roman because he is referring specifically to Ovid’s Medusa.

The Myth: The Shield's Reflection

It is significant that it is only through Perseus that we get a description of Medusa, for he is one of very few to have seen her and lived to tell the tale. In Homer's mentioning of the Gorgon, for example, the terror she incites is described, rather than what she looks like, because one cannot look directly at her. Therefore, we are essentially looking at Medusa through Perseus' eyes, and it begs the question: what does he see?

According to Apollodorus' description, Medusa and her Gorgon sisters have 'heads twined about with the scales of dragons, and great tusks like swine's, and brazen hands, and golden wings, by which they flew; and they turned to stone such as beheld them' (*Bibliotheca* 2.4.2). Note that Apollodorus' description does not mention what has come to be Medusa's defining feature: her snake hair. Ancient Greek art, prior to the classical period, tends to show Medusa with a bloated face, stuck-out tongue, large eyes, and often with tusks, and she usually has a snake somewhere on her person (see fig. 0.1). Some of the earliest existing depictions of Gorgons show 'snakes wrapped around their waists (Corfu) or around their heads and under their chins (Eleusis, Corinth)', but as Stephen R. Wilk adds, 'these Gorgons had hair as well as snakes' (2008, 46).¹⁵ It was during the classical period (c. 510-323 BCE) that Medusa, as well as other female monsters such as the Sirens and the Sphinx, were 'maidenized' (Lowe 2015, 103).¹⁶ In this period, emphasis was placed on these monsters' gender (for more on this, see chapter one), yet they remained hybrids. For example, the Sirens, although having more pleasant female faces, still had the bodies of birds. Similarly, Medusa was still associated with snakes, which came to circle her head, and this gradually developed into her having



Fig. 0.1. A distinctly unfeminine Gorgon, with snakes weaved through her hair, a muscular body, large eyes, and a sticking out tongue. Attic Black Figure, Amphora, c. 550 - 500 B.C. Musée du Louvre, Paris. N1020 or F230.

¹⁵ Wilk should be treated with a little caution, for he is a scientist and engineer who has written on a variety of topics.

¹⁶ See Karoglou (2018). It is also important to note that depictions of Medusa as an 'ugly' creature still continued to be made throughout the Greek world, she was not simply shown as beautiful during the classical period. Thus, Topper (2007) argues that the transition from 'grotesque' to a 'beautiful' Medusa was not simply chronological, but more dependent on what meaning the artist was trying to convey.

snake-hair (Wilk 2008, 46).¹⁷ It is Ovid who is the first preserved literary source to mention the serpent-locks of Medusa.¹⁸

Ovid's version of Medusa slightly differs to Apollodorus' as the Romans viewed the monsters they inherited from the Greek myths in similar, but not exact, terms. The Roman poets during the Augustan period adopted the 'maidenized' versions of these Greek female monsters but gave new perspectives that served to highlight the poet's creativity and novelty, although the same sentiments relating to particular gendered fears or concerns seemed to remain (Lowe 2015, 32). To quote Lowe: 'the belief that female minds and bodies are messier and less controlled than male ones persisted throughout classical antiquity, and the female body prompted fearful speculation in various cultural contexts' (2015, 70). Further, female monsters arguably presented more of a threat than their male counterparts. While male monsters such as the hybrid Centaurs could often talk and were presented as 'doomed combatants', female monsters such as the Scylla, the Sirens, and Medusa are 'unapproachable' and a more complex obstacle (Lowe 2015, 71). For example, the only way Odysseus could 'defeat' the Sirens, who lured men to death with their song, was to be bound to his ship. Likewise, Perseus had to become a bit more creative to defeat a monster he could not look at directly. Thus, to return to Lowe:

There is no initial hope of coexistence, or of closure through mortal combat, making the 'hyperfemininity' of female monsters more disturbing than the 'hypermasculinity' of males. Roman poets of the Augustan period preserve these distinctions...
Lowe 2015, 71.

Thus, in Ovid's account, Medusa remains a monster, though with an additional new element: a sympathetic backstory.

The Myth: Medusa's Rape

Through the voice of Perseus, Ovid explains how Medusa alone out of her Gorgon sisters came to have snake-hair. He says that Medusa was once a beautiful woman, whose hair was particularly striking. However, after she was raped by Neptune (Poseidon) in the temple of Minerva (Athena), the goddess punished this action by changing Medusa's hair into snakes (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.799-803). It must be noted here that an understanding of rape in the

¹⁷ According to Wilk, Medusa gradually came to simply have snake hair because of the lack of room on coins to depict both her hair and snakes entwined within it (Wilk 2008, 46).

¹⁸ Note, however, that even Ovid departs from his description of Medusa's hair in the *Metamorphoses* in his work *Ex Ponto*, where he records that Medusa's hair was 'knotty' and 'tied with a snake' (3.1.124, quoted in Lowe 2015, 110).

ancient world does not directly correspond with its modern definition, and this is discussed in chapter four. However, many modern women certainly relate to this aspect of Medusa's story and view her as a silenced victim, see for example Ann Stanford's poem 'Medusa' (1977).¹⁹ This notion of victimhood and transformation shall frame my analysis of Lady Gaga in chapter four to explore her position as a victim of male violence and her subsequent appropriation of the monster, which I argue can be viewed through Ovid's Medusa. Additionally, Ovid also describes how, after Perseus decapitates Medusa's head, the children she involuntarily conceived with Neptune (Poseidon) are born from the blood that seeps from her gaping neck. Her children are Chrysaor and Pegasus, with the former often portrayed as a winged boar and the latter a winged horse, and this may potentially allude to Ovid's later revelation that Neptune raped Medusa by taking the form of a bird (*Metamorphoses* 6.119-120). Thus, Medusa is also a mother to two hybrid, and thus monstrous, children.²⁰ This is integral to my analysis of Lady Gaga in my second chapter dedicated to the pop star as a 'Mother Monster' to her fans, her 'Little Monsters', and is useful for an analysis of how (and why) Gaga encourages her audience to share in a collective monstrous identity with her.

Therefore, although other sources omit the detail of a sexual violation, with earlier source Hesiod mentioning Medusa laying with Poseidon (*Theogony* 270ff) and Apollodorus suggesting that Athena turned Medusa into a monster because Medusa dared to compare her beauty to the goddess' (Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 2.4.3), Ovid clearly shows how myth could be adopted and manipulated by adding this additional detail of Neptune's intercourse with Medusa being a non-consensual act. Medusa thus remains a monster, yet a beauty, who can turn men and beasts to stone; but she is also a victim, and this creates a 'blend of empathy and voyeurism' (Lowe 2015, 72).²¹ To again quote Lowe: 'this distinctly Roman, and indeed Augustan, approach is to combine misogynistic nightmare with some of pleasurable curiosity, both visual and psychological' (Lowe 2015, 72). By placing emphasis on her looks, Ovid

¹⁹ The poem describes Medusa's ordeal and the horror of being left to give birth to her rapist's children.

²⁰ There is little mentioned about Chrysaor, apart from him fathering Geryon, a three-bodied giant whom Heracles later kills (Hesiod, *Theogony* 287 ff). Pegasus, although a hybrid and thus physically monstrous, is not deemed malevolent. He is tamed by the hero Bellerophon and is instrumental in helping the hero defeat the Chimera, a monster described by Hesiod as follows: 'Her heads were three: one was that of a glare-eyed lion, one of a goat, and the third of a snake, a powerful drakon (serpentine-dragon)' (Hesiod, *Theogony* 319 ff, trans. H. G. Evelyn-White). Two hybrids are pitted against each other, but as Pegasus has been 'domesticated and manipulated by a male hero', he is brought under control and viewed positively (Felton 2012, 115).

²¹ Apollodorus also alluded to Medusa's beauty in his account: 'they say that the Gorgon was fain to match herself with the goddess even in beauty' (*Bibliotheca* 2.4.3), thus possibly referring to Medusa prior to her change by Athena. However, regardless of whether Medusa is externally terrifying or beautiful, in both accounts she is innately monstrous because she can petrify those who look at her.

plays with the way female monsters can affect male viewers, as Medusa entices the gaze as a spectacle either through her monstrosity or her beauty (Lowe 2015, 73). Further, by giving Medusa a backstory, although not necessarily told from her perspective, there is an element of ‘pathos’, and it challenges the heroism of Perseus (Lowe 2015, 110).

There are many themes to be drawn from Medusa’s myth that show her as a complex and ambivalent figure. Even her blood, according to Euripides’ play *Ion* (c. 413 BCE), could have both life giving and fatal consequences (*Ion* 1005). While Medusa could kill with her gaze, she could also protect as an apotropaic device, and at the end of her myth, Perseus returns the Gorgon’s head, known as the Gorgoneion, to Athena/Minerva, the creator of Medusa’s monstrous form, to wear on her aegis to protect the goddess. Thus, while Medusa strikes fear, to modern receivers of her myth she can also be read as a victim or even a symbol of women’s rage and power. As a combination of grotesque monstrosity and feminine beauty, Medusa is a deadly threat because she entices the gaze with her appearance and is powerful when looked *at* and when she looks *back*. This is significant for my reading of the pop stars within this thesis who ‘see you seeing us’ (Soloway 2016), and subsequently manipulate their appearance, that quite often combines feminine beauty with the monstrous-feminine, to attract the gaze of the spectator and to orchestrate how they are viewed. These women, like Medusa, point to the power of the female image when looked at *directly* rather than through a male lens, such as Perseus’ shield, which often segregates women into two dichotomous groups: evil monstrous Medusas or passive virginal Andromedas. Therefore, it leads us to question what Medusa would have said if she had a voice. Was she a monster, or was this simply Perseus’ interpretation? It points to the need to interrogate the myths as we tell them today and to acknowledge that myths can continue to change. Yet, predominantly male writing has continued to conflate women’s bodies and behaviour with monsters such as Medusa in their writing. As classicist Dunstan Lowe states, ‘the modern concept of the “monstrous-feminine” finds many manifestations in classical antiquity: Aristotle infamously defined a female as a deformed male’ (2015, 70).²² The ‘monstrous-feminine’ is a phrase used by horror film theorist Barbara Creed (1993) that describes how monsters in general embody male fears connected to the female body, and Lowe highlights how monsters in the modern day have ancient mythical precedents. Thus, while the male monsters of the ancient

²² The use of ‘infamous’ is likely in reference to Aristotle’s views on women being informed by his own flawed research. Philosopher Robert Mayhew argues in *The Female in Aristotle's Biology: Reason or Rationalization* (2004), rather than interpreting Aristotle’s views on women as Greek male misogyny, his views may have been informed by his own flawed philosophical and scientific findings.

world, such as the Centaurs or the Minotaur, had exaggerated masculine attributes, such as size and strength and were more prone to anger and violence (Lowe 2015, 163), female monsters, such as Medusa, encapsulated specific ‘misogynistic’ concerns (Lowe 2015, 73).²³ Medusa is certainly not free from these shackles, and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in the early twentieth century interpreted her simply as a reflection of male fear of women. Freud’s Medusa profoundly influenced later film theorists, and this presents a problem for using film theory to analyse the pop stars of this thesis whom, I argue, reappropriate Medusa to subvert monstrous narratives to empower themselves as women and their fans. Therefore, an analysis of Freud and subsequent use of his Medusa is needed here before I propose how I will create my own interdisciplinary framework through which to read these female pop stars.

Freud used Ovid’s version of the Medusa myth, where she is both beautiful, grotesque, and has snake hair, in his developing theories of psychoanalysis, suggesting that the myth can reveal unconscious fears (Lowe 2015, 112). Freud read Medusa’s head as symbolising the female genitals and, as part of his theory of the Oedipus Complex, argued that sight of the female’s genitalia is attractive to the male spectator, but that they are also a site of horror for they induce a fear of castration. Thus, while it is clear that Medusa can be interpreted to mean many things (and she has in the thousands of years post to her myth), Freud reduced her to the fear men have of women’s bodies, i.e., a fear of a sex difference.

Psychoanalysis: Sigmund Freud

Freud viewed myths and fairy tales as reflecting the desires of the unconscious, much like dreams. It is worth quoting Freud at length here, particularly because the pop stars of this thesis, as will be discussed below, are inspired by both narrative types:

Dream symbolism extends far beyond dreams: it is not peculiar to dreams, but exercises a similar dominating influence on representation in fairy tales, myths and legends, in jokes and in folk lore... We must not suppose that dream symbolism is a creation of the dream work; it is in all probability a characteristic of the unconscious thinking which provides the dream work with the material for condensation, displacement and dramatization.
Freud ‘On Dreams’ 1901, 74.

Thus, Freud read classical myth as manifestations of inherent fears and desires hidden within the unconscious. Though he acknowledged the stories of the Titans, and Uranus and Cronus who conducted ‘pretty elementary pre-human acts: eating their children and castrating their

²³ Though, as Lowe says, in the Hellenistic period, a female centaur was introduced (2015, 32).

fathers' (Bowlby 2006, 31), to outline his theory of castration anxiety, he used a different mythical figure: Oedipus. His reflections on Oedipus are key to the foundations of his work more broadly, and thus, before discussing his use of Medusa to further frame this complex, it must be noted how he first developed this theory after watching a rendition of Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* (c. 429 BCE).

Freud first points to his Oedipal theory in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).²⁴ He refers to Sophocles' version of the story of King Oedipus, the son of King Laius of Thebes. The tale goes as follows. When an oracle reveals to King Laius that his son will kill him, the king expels the young Oedipus, who is then found and raised by a foster family. When Oedipus has grown, he too visits the oracle which reveals to him that he must avoid his home otherwise he will kill his father and marry his mother. As Oedipus believes his home is where he currently lives rather than Thebes, he leaves immediately only to kill (unbeknownst to him) his biological father, King Laius, on his journey. Further, upon arriving at Thebes he finds that the Sphinx, a she-monster with a lion's body, the wings of a bird, and a woman's face, has been causing disorder by asking passers-by to solve a riddle. Oedipus defeats the Sphinx by solving her riddle and, as a reward for defeating this monster, he is made king and marries the queen Jocasta, who is (again, unbeknownst to him) his biological mother. Oedipus has unwittingly fulfilled the oracle's prophecy, but it is only after his children are born, that it is revealed to Oedipus that he has killed his father and married his mother. Thus, as Freud states: 'appalled at the abomination which he has unwittingly perpetrated, Oedipus blinds himself and forsakes his home' (Freud 1900, 262). The tale, according to Freud, speaks of the primal urges of young male infants to kill the father and to direct 'sexual impulse at the mother' that can often manifest in dreams (Freud 1900, 262). Freud points to an episode within *Oedipus Rex* where Oedipus confides in Jocasta his troubles regarding the oracle's prediction that said he would marry his mother, at a point in the play where he still cannot 'see' that he has fulfilled the prophecy. Jocasta replies that 'many a man ere now in dreams hath lain with her who bare him' (line 982ff, quoted in Freud 1900, 264). Thus, if these urges that manifest in dream become reality, Freud argues, it can lead to neurosis.

Freud suggests that, to resolve the pre-Oedipal primal urges, where the boy incestuously desires the mother as his first object of sexual desire and wishes to kill the father whom he considers his rival, the male infant must resolve his Oedipus Complex by cutting

²⁴ At this point, he had not yet referred to this theory as the Oedipus Complex.

away from the mother (a castration of sorts) and aligning himself with the father. Freud connected this transition from the pre-Oedipal to the Oedipal stage as marked by a castration anxiety based upon the revelation that the mother's genitals are different to the boy's own. This was further outlined by Freud in an essay titled 'Medusa's Head' (1922 – released posthumously in 1940). Freud argues that when a young boy first glimpses his mother's genitalia, he believes she has been castrated because she does not have a penis. The young boy panics and believes the father had castrated the mother and, if the young boy does not direct his incestuous love away from the mother and onto a more suitable woman, the father will also castrate him. Therefore, the boy sides with the father who becomes the figure of authority, i.e., patriarchy. In Freud's reading of Medusa, the Gorgon's snake hair comes to symbolise the mother's pubic hair that does not surround a penis. Thus, to quote Freud: 'The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something' (1922, 84). However, the snake hair also acts as a fetish because the snakes, which symbolise multiple phalli, attempt to disguise the fact that woman does not possess a penis. Further, Freud also read Medusa's gaze as her ability to turn men 'stiff with terror', a euphemism 'for becoming stiff means an erection' (Freud 1922, 85). This again seeks to assuage the male's anxiety by reminding him that he is still in possession of his own penis.

The story of Oedipus and the Sphinx invites comparison with the tale of Perseus and Medusa. Both King Laius and Acrisius receive prophecies regarding a future male relative who will kill them. As a result, both Oedipus and Perseus are removed from their homes and must, for different reasons, kill a female monster. After killing the monster, Oedipus is rewarded his mother in marriage, whereas Perseus goes on to kill another monster and wins the hand of Andromeda. Unlike Oedipus, Perseus has directed his sexual impulse towards a woman who is not his mother. Oedipus, who has fulfilled his primal urges, must blind himself, whereas Perseus not only retains his sight after defeating a monster who threatens vision, but also appropriates the Gorgon's potent gaze as his own. This connection between sight and castration was also more explicitly stated by Freud in his essay 'The Uncanny' (1919):

A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that a morbid anxiety connected with the eyes and with going blind is often enough a substitute for the dread of castration. In blinding himself, Oedipus, that mythical law-breaker, was simply carrying out a mitigated form of the punishment of castration – the only punishment that according to the *lex talionis* was fitted for him.²⁵
Freud 1919, 7.

Thus, Oedipus' story reveals what happens when the primal urges of the male are unresolved, while Perseus' story relates to the successful passage through the complex, with both tales seemingly relating castration with the gaze. As will become clearer below, Freud's connection between sight and castration was to have a strong impact on early feminist film theory. Early theories argued that cinema narratives are Oedipal in structure, and that women onscreen are passive objects to be looked at by a male audience who assert their dominant gaze to assuage their unconscious castration fears. This is comparable to Freud's reading of the Perseus myth, where the hero had to subject Medusa, the monster that symbolised women's castrated genitals and led the male onlooker to fear for his own genitalia, to his gaze by looking at her image in his shield so that he could fetishize and subjugate her, thus overcoming his castration anxiety.

After establishing the psycho-development of young boys, Freud considered the development of young girls in his lecture 'Femininity' (1933), where he infamously referred to femininity as a 'riddle' (1933, 113). Freud's exploration of why masculinity and femininity are considered active and passive respectively, led him to put forth his suggestion of the girl's own 'castration complex' and entry into femininity (1933, 124). Freud suggested that both boys and girls during the pre-Oedipal stage have a sexual desire for the mother as a first-love object. During this stage, the girl is bisexual in her love for the mother and is both masculine and feminine, taking active enjoyment in her genitals which she does not yet realise are different from the male's. However, once the young girl realises that she is 'castrated' just like the mother, the little girl resents her mother and becomes hostile to her, and thus she has entered a castration complex (Freud 1933, 124). The girl now develops 'envy for the penis' (Freud 1933, 125) and rejects clitoral masturbation upon knowing that the male has better 'equipment' and she no longer gains pleasure from her genitals (Freud 1933, 126):

Along with the abandonment of clitoral masturbation a certain amount of activity is renounced. Passivity now has the upper hand, and the girls' turning to her father is accomplished principally with the help of passive instinctual impulses. You can see

²⁵ *Lex talionis* meaning 'an eye for an eye'.

that a wave of development like this, which clears the phallic out of the way, smooths the ground for femininity.
Freud 1933, 128.

This is how Freud explains femininity's association with passivity. He continues to argue that the girl, in turning to her father, wishes to bear him a son and this replaces her wish for a penis (Freud 1933, 128). As the girl enters the Oedipus Complex, she now views her mother as her rival for her father's affection. Thus, in terms of desire, woman wishes to be desired rather than herself desiring (Freud 1933, 132). However, whereas boys have the threat of castration, girls do not, and their resolution of the Oedipus Complex is therefore incomplete. As a result:

...the development of femininity remains exposed to disturbance by the residual phenomena of the early masculine period. Regressions to the fixations of the pre-Oedipus phases very frequently occur; in the course of some women's lives there is a repeated alternation between periods in which masculinity or femininity gains the upper hand.
Freud 1933, 131.

Woman, therefore, remains bisexual.

Freud largely perpetuates an understanding of men and women in active and passive terms, and he used Medusa to highlight this as well as to point to the significance of sight in his castration theory. For Freud, the Gorgon is symbolic of women, or mothers, who simply represent the threat of castration, while it is the father who is positioned as the castrator. Yet, it is the mother who is aligned with the monstrous Gorgon because of her apparent difference, and thus the young boy must separate from her and side himself with the father (patriarchy). Medusa continues to be used to articulate themes of dominance and subjugation, and she was used in gaze theory after Freud by Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Sartre argued that sight was a form of power, while being looked at as an object was a threat to one's subjectivity. Thus, to defeat Medusa, who threatens one's subjectivity with her own objectifying gaze, Perseus had to subject her to his own gaze. This leads into Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory and coining of the phrase 'the male gaze'. According to Mulvey, who created this mesh of film and gaze theory, power remains with the one who looks, in her case the male, while the one who is looked at (woman) is powerless. For Mulvey, women cannot be powerful as sexual objects.

Feminist Film Theory: Laura Mulvey

Freud's theory greatly influenced the work of feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, particularly because of the connection between castration and sight. In her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), she used Freud's work alongside Jacques Lacan's to argue that cinema is created by patriarchy (for psychoanalysis can demonstrate 'the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form' [1975, 57]) and reduces onscreen images of women to objects that bring pleasure and reassurance to the male spectator.

Mulvey begins with a consideration of Freud's scopophilia theory that he first put forth in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) and which he later developed in *Instincts and their Vicissitudes* (1915). In the words of Mulvey, Freud deduced that, although scopophilia arises in children, the 'desire to see' continues into adulthood as the 'erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object' (Mulvey 1975, 59-60). Mulvey then considers Lacan's mirror stage and looking in relation to narcissism (1975, 60). The mirror is a key theme throughout this thesis, particularly because it was via reflection that Perseus was able to view Medusa, and so a summary of Lacan's theory is useful here.

Lacan claimed that during the pre-Oedipal stage (i.e., prior to castration), and during the Imaginary (one of Lacan's three 'states of being') which is 'pre-verbal' and 'pre-social', the infant is unaware of the difference between his or her self and the mother, nor 'between internal and external worlds' (Hook 2006, 61).²⁶ During this period, the mother is viewed as a 'real, omnipotent "power", a law unto herself', largely because she can give or deny the child the breast, or 'choose' to attend to the child when he or she cries (Bowden 2011, 219). It is during the Imaginary, and between the ages of six to eighteen months, that Lacan places his mirror stage.²⁷ He first mentioned this stage at a conference in 1936, and in 1949 he published his paper 'The Mirror Stage a Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience'. In this piece, Lacan argued that, by looking at one's reflection, a child starts to see itself as an external entity and begins to establish a sense of 'I' that is separate from the Other (particularly the mother).²⁸ However, this reflected image is an 'Ideal-I' or what Lacan refers to as an 'Imago' (Lacan 1949, 2). Essentially, the mirror image

²⁶ The other two states are the Symbolic and the Real. The Symbolic is described below, but the Real is a little more complicated, and can be referred to as 'that which cannot be signified, that which cannot be captured or reduced to symbolic expression' (Hook 2006, 62).

²⁷ That this took place in the Imaginary was added by Lacan after he established the mirror stage.

²⁸ It is for this reason that Gillian M. E. Alban, who I return to below, refers to the Other of the mirror stage as the m(other) (Alban 2017, 20).

is a unified whole, a complete self, but this is a ‘mis-recognition’ for ‘he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body’ (Mulvey 1975, 60). Lacan later adds that the mirror reflection does not have to be a literal mirror, but other figures can also provide reflections. To clarify, this can include primary caregivers such as the mother, whom the child imitates in their behaviour (Julien 1994, 30).²⁹ It is when the father, or father figure, enters this relationship and places a prohibition on the mother to prevent the taboo of incest (for the child desires the mother), and thus, in a sense castrates the child from the mother, that the union between mother and child is broken. The child comes to realise the father is the source of power, rather than the mother, and can take up their subject position in the Symbolic (the Symbolic is ‘that pre-established world, in other words, of language, culture, law [and, indeed, patriarchy]’) (Hook 2006, 62). However, Lacan argues that we are not complete as beings, there is always a ‘lack’, and we continue throughout life trying to fill this void to become a unified self. Thus, Lacan prefers the term ‘subject’ rather than ‘self’, for the subject is ‘always divided, split, or barred’ (Hook 2006, 61).

It is also worth outlining Lacan’s castration theory, for it is very different to Freud’s and will be briefly returned to within the thesis. Whereas Freud placed emphasis on biology, Lacan focused on *language* (Hook 2006, 60). The ‘lack’ according to Lacan is the phallus, a signifier that represents the complete or whole body. There is a desire to cover up a lack that cannot be filled, and this is the role of the phallus. To clarify, when the infant is in the pre-Oedipal relationship with the mother, they believe she is all-powerful and complete, and she is therefore viewed as phallic for she does not ‘lack’ (the power of the pre-Oedipal mother will form an important part of my analysis of Lady Gaga as a monstrous mother to her fans in chapter five). The child wishes to be the sole object of the mother’s desire, and thus wishes to be the phallus. However, when the child realises that they are not the sole object of the mother’s desire, for she also desires the father (or father figure), the child now views the father as the phallus and as *the law*. It is at this point in the child’s development that they attain language. Language is essential to differentiate the Imaginary and the Symbolic. While during the Imaginary there was unity with the mother, in the Symbolic there must be a distance, an understanding of the difference between signifier and signified, that replicates the difference, in a sense, between self and Other. Thus, it is the infant’s desire to alert the mother that it wants or misses something (i.e., it is lacking something), for example her breast, that gives rise for the need of language (Hook 2006, 67). This marks the transition

²⁹ Drawing comparisons with mirror neurons.

from the Imaginary to the Symbolic where, to become a subject, one must acquire language (Hook 2006, 66).

Language thus becomes bound with lack or symbolic castration, for it is language that attempts to create meaning as a substitute: 'words stand in for the object they represent; they come, in a sense, to replace the things to which they refer' (Hook 2006, 67). There is always a lack then, as language is limited and does not always fully replace what one is trying to signify (an important concept that shall be discussed in chapter five). The child comes to realise that they cannot compete with the father, nor will they ever have the phallus, and thus they attempt to cover up their 'lack' with a phallic signifier. There is a notable distinction here between the Imaginary phallus and the Symbolic phallus. In the Imaginary, the child repeatedly attempts to identify itself with the phallus, but in the Symbolic it conveys meaning; it is a signifier of the mother or father's desire, and something the 'child does not have', and thus a 'lack' (Hook 2006, 72). Thus, it becomes 'not so much a thing as a position' and represents what one desires (such as wealth, status) and how one is viewed by others (Hook 2006, 73). What is key to note here is that Lacan situates men and women in different positions relating to desire, or how we wish to be desired. Men (or those who identify as men) want to have the phallic signifier, so that they are desirable for having wealth or status, while desiring others, but women (those who identify as women) want to become 'that which is most cherished or desired' (Hook 2006, 80).

Returning to Mulvey, she views both the act of looking at the other as sexual object (Freud) and the act of looking at oneself as the ideal ego (Lacan) being inherent in the act of watching a film at the cinema. Firstly, the pleasurable erotic act of looking is re-created in the dark cinema, which creates the ideal environment for the illusion of a secretive voyeuristic gaze. Secondly, the cinema screen draws parallels with the mirror, where the film star onscreen becomes the ideal ego, recreating the 'wholeness' of the reflected complete self. However, as the world is 'ordered by sexual imbalance', it is woman who is the object, whereas the figure of ego identification is the male protagonist who becomes the 'spectator's surrogate' (Mulvey 1975, 68). Thus, as men cannot cope with being the object of the gaze, the audience (which Mulvey assumes is male), identifies with his look (Mulvey 1975, 63). This can be viewed in relation to the different positions related to desire as posited by Lacan, mentioned above. The male onscreen, as he is powerful because he looks with his omnipotent gaze and is the ideal-I, is viewed as a unified whole that possesses a phallus that covers his lack. This unified whole becomes the mirror image with whom the male spectator identifies,

and looks vicariously through his eyes, or the patriarchal structure of the camera, to objectify the source of his desire: woman.

The cinema narrative, as argued by Mulvey, repeatedly depicts beautified images of women that ‘connote to-be-looked-at-ness’ as spectacles who signify ‘male desire’ (1975, 62). Therefore, looking in cinema is based on a dichotomy of the active male and the passive female; woman is simply to be looked at by an exclusively ‘male gaze’ and serves as a static figure who calls man to action (Mulvey 1975, 62). This is in line with Freud’s views of femininity as passive and lacking desire. Yet, women also present a problem for they evoke castration anxiety. Again, the male gaze is instrumental in ensuring the spectator, whom Mulvey continues to assume is male, still derives pleasure. There are two possibilities that Mulvey gives here, and both derive from Freudian theory. One is voyeurism that is linked with sadism (according to Mulvey ‘sadism demands a story’), whereby woman must be ‘investigated’ in a ‘re-enactment of the original trauma’ and, upon finding her guilty (of inciting castration anxiety), she must be punished or saved (this is typical of film noir) (Mulvey 1975, 64). The other is fetishistic scopophilia, where a body part or piece of clothing that the woman wears distracts the male gaze from her apparent absent penis, much like the snake hair of Medusa draws attention away from the ‘castrated’ female genitalia (Mulvey 1975, 64). Using the films of Alfred Hitchcock and Josef von Sternberg as examples, Mulvey argues that, while Hitchcock used both sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia in his films, von Sternberg focused on the latter (Mulvey 1975, 64). Von Sternberg repeatedly used the actress Marlene Dietrich in his work, and Mulvey alludes to Dietrich as being the ‘ultimate fetish’ (1975, 65). Thus, to quote Mulvey, in psychoanalysis, women have two functions ‘in forming the patriarchal unconscious’: one, is to represent the threat of castration as discussed here, while the other is to raise children into the Symbolic (Mulvey 1975, 57-8).³⁰

Mulvey also argues that there are three forms of ‘looking’ at play in cinema, with all three aligned with the male. They are: ‘that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion’ (1975, 68). Cinema narrative subordinates the first two to the third to give the illusion that the spectator controls the narrative and eliminating an ‘intrusive

³⁰ After the child has separated from her, unless there is a regression to this infantile relationship with the mother, she essentially no longer holds authority.

camera presence' to enhance the audience's collective identification with the male protagonist onscreen (Mulvey 1975, 68). In von Sternberg's films with Dietrich, according to Mulvey, there is the absence 'of the controlling male gaze within the screen scene' and thus, rather than viewing Dietrich through the eyes of the male protagonist, the cinema audience's gaze directly meets Dietrich as an erotic spectacle (1975, 65). Thus, though 'there are other witnesses, other spectators watching her on the screen, their gaze is one with, not standing in for, that of the audience' (Mulvey 1975, 65). Mulvey's reading of Marlene Dietrich is important for a reading of Madonna (chapter three), for Madonna bases so much of her own appearance on Dietrich. Yet, although Mulvey argues for the dominance of the male look, she also seems to allude to the Medusa myth when she points to the potential power of the female image and men's overwhelming fear:

Simultaneously, the look of the audience is denied an intrinsic force: as soon as fetishistic representation of the female image threatens to break the spell of illusion, and the erotic image on the screen appears directly (without mediation) to the spectator, the fact of fetishization, concealing as it does castration fear, freezes the look, fixates the spectator and prevents him from achieving any distance from the image in front of him.

Mulvey 1975, 68.

Essentially, if the male audience were to look directly at women and the illusion of the fetish is broken, they would be frozen, just as if Perseus were to look at Medusa directly rather than through his shield where he can subject her to his gaze and fetishize her. Similarly, this is an argument put forth by film theorist Siegfried Kracauer, who argues that, just as Athena's shield mitigates the power or horror of Medusa, so too the cinema screen which offers reflections rather than the real thing (see Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* 1960, 305-6).³¹ Crucially, although this is not directly stated by Mulvey, her analysis arguably points to women only being safe to look at when their image is reflected by and for *men*. As shall become clearer below, this is essential for my own analysis of both Medusa and women onscreen.

³¹ Woman as a threat that can be viewed safely onscreen, with the screen being akin to Perseus' shield, is also found in Amy Adler's article 'Performance Anxiety: Medusa, Sex and the First Amendment' (2009). Adler uses Freud's Medusa and applies it to her analysis of the *Barnes vs Glen Theatre* case in Indiana, US, 1991. When two adult entertainment venues, *Kitty Kat Lounge, Inc.* and the *Glen Theatre, Inc.*, wanted to offer fully nude stripteases by their female dancers to their clientele, the Supreme Court ruled that the performers must wear G-strings and pasties (Adler 2009, 230). Thus, while one could watch one of the female dancers, Gayle Ann Marie Sutro, fully nude onscreen in a nearby adult cinema venue, they could not watch her strip live. Adler uses Freud's Medusa to argue that 'the G-string acts as a Freudian fetish, warding off violent fantasies of castration' (2009, 238). Thus, the threat of a 'castrated woman' is too much and is only safe to view as a passive image through a male lens, much like the image of Medusa was only safe to look at via Perseus' shield (2009, 242).

Mulvey's theory received strong criticism, largely because of her apparent disregard for female spectators and the potential for a female gaze (although other identities or influencing factors such as sexuality, race, or class were not explored either), or consideration of films where there is a female protagonist. Mulvey addressed this in her follow up essay 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)' (1981), stating that when she initially used 'male' to refer to the spectator's gaze, this was intended to be taken ironically as it pointed to Hollywood films simply speaking to male desires (1981, 122). For the women in the audience, Mulvey posits that they may not identify with the masculine pleasure film offers or, and it is this type of spectator which she focuses on, female spectators may take pleasure in films which appeal to their repressed masculinity. Using Freud's 'Femininity' where he argued for women's potential to regress to a pre-Oedipal bisexuality, Mulvey considers the way women watch films by pointing to an oscillation between their inherent passive femininity and a repressed active masculinity (1981, 123). For Mulvey, the female gaze differs from the male's because, in order to enjoy film, women may identify with the active male hero as part of a 'trans-sex identification', which allows 'a woman spectator to rediscover that lost aspect of her sexual identity, the never fully repressed bed-rock of feminine neurosis' (1981, 124). In other words, there is a female gaze of sorts, but one where the female spectator views the film through the male gaze. Thus, using the example of *Perseus and Andromeda*, Mulvey points to stories in both myth and fairy tale where women are repeatedly presented as passive (*Andromeda*) in contrast to the active hero (*Perseus*) and thus:

the 'grammar' of the story places the reader, listener or spectator with the hero. The woman spectator in the cinema can make use of an age-old cultural tradition adapting her to this convention, which eases a transition out of her own sex into another.
Mulvey 1981, 125.

Cinema therefore continues the work of its predecessors (myth and stories), only with more emphasis on the visual. Further, just as the female spectator 'oscillates' between masculinity and femininity, so does the female protagonist onscreen, but the narrative actively encourages her into a feminine role rather than a masculine one. Laura Mulvey, in her consideration of women in the cinema audience, continues to view the gaze as masculine, and men and women in a respective active and passive dichotomy. Similarly, film theorist Stephen Heath, who also used the *Medusa* myth very briefly in his essay 'Difference' (1978), argued that, even if women did possess the gaze, this would be to their detriment for it further highlights women as sources of castration anxiety and punishment or subjugation. To quote Heath: 'If

the woman looks, the spectacle provokes, castration is in the air, the Medusa's head is not far off; thus she must not look, is absorbed herself on the side of the seen, seeing herself seeing herself' (1978, 81). For these film theorists, women's access to the gaze is very limited.

Italian feminist film theorist Teresa de Lauretis challenged this by noting that Freud's reading was more complicated than Mulvey believed and argued that women can have an active desire and thus can also look at, and identify with, onscreen images without the need for transvestism. Teresa de Lauretis in *Alice Doesn't* (1984) uses Freudian theory and Medusa to argue that women (as women) can look.

Feminist Film Theory: Teresa de Lauretis

Teresa de Lauretis considers Laura Mulvey's assertion that 'sadism demands a story' and the subsequent investigation of women onscreen, and again points to Freud's theories of the unconscious as profoundly useful for reading film. She reads much of past myths, stories, and film as Oedipal in their narrative structure, with Oedipus being 'paradigmatic of all narratives' (de Lauretis 1984, 112). De Lauretis suggests that women in narratives serve as the figures who set the story in motion; they can either be the object of the male's desire, the landscape the hero must traverse, or the obstacle he must defeat (de Lauretis 1984, 141).

De Lauretis views film, like Mulvey, as inextricably linked with desires that arise from our infancy: 'cinematic apparatus...binds affect and meaning to images by establishing terms of identification, orienting the movement of desire, and positioning the spectator in relation to them' (de Lauretis 1984, 137). However, as Oedipus is 'paradigmatic of all narratives', film largely speaks to men's desires (de Lauretis 1984, 112). De Lauretis refers to the Oedipus myth, and views the riddle of the Sphinx as comparable to Freud's 'riddle of femininity' which is sparked by man's desire to know, to 'see', and his desire for woman (de Lauretis 1984, 111). She connects the Sphinx and Medusa as the monstrous obstacles that threaten male vision:

The legends of Perseus and Oedipus in which they are inscribed, make it clear that their threat is to man's vision, and their power consists in their enigma and 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (in Mulvey's words), their luring of man's gaze into the 'dark continent' as Freud put it, the enigma of femininity.³²
de Lauretis 1984, 110.

³² The 'dark continent' phrase was adopted by Freud from Henry Stanley, explored further in chapter one.

The Oedipal trajectory of the narrative means that once female monsters have fulfilled their narrative function as obstacles, that is the end of their role and their voices are not heard, rather they are ‘inscribed in hero’s narratives, in someone else’s story, not their own’ (de Lauretis 1984, 109). The hero must defeat these monsters and absorb their powers (knowledge and sight) as his own in order to resolve his Oedipus Complex, and avoid the threat of castration (remember, loss of sight is connected to castration) (de Lauretis 1984, 112).³³ The hero’s reward is woman in his fulfilment of his ‘social contract’, although in the case of Oedipus of course, his contract is not completed due to killing his father and marrying his mother (de Lauretis 1984, 133). Yet, cinema must also appeal to women for its financial success. In relation to visual pleasure offered to female spectators, de Lauretis poses the following question: ‘What did Medusa feel seeing herself reflected in Perseus’ shield just before being slain?’ (1984, 134). In other words, de Lauretis is asking what pleasure, what desire, does the female spectator gain or fulfil from watching films that repeatedly subjugate women? Her question is rather tongue-in-cheek as Medusa was asleep when Perseus slew her, thus Medusa did not see – and that is her point. Woman only ‘wakes up’ like a Sleeping Beauty-type figure after the powerful woman onscreen has been killed in favour of the passive woman (de Lauretis 1984, 135).

De Lauretis does, however, argue that there are ways in which women’s desire can be inserted into film, enabling women to identify with certain images onscreen, and she uses Freud’s theory of female bisexuality to do this. As has been mentioned above, Freud argued that women are bisexual, there is a continued inherent masculinity and femininity. Thus, for the female spectator there are two available options. One is to take an identification with the masculine active gaze or the feminine passive image (de Lauretis 1984, 144). The other is a double identification with both ‘the figure of narrative movement, the mythical subject’ and ‘with the figure of narrative closure, the narrative image’ (de Lauretis 1984, 144). To quote de Lauretis:

This manner of identification would uphold both positionalities of desire, both active and passive aims: desire for the other, and desire to be desired by the other. This, I think, is in fact the operation by which narrative and cinema solicit the spectators’ consent and seduce women into femininity...
de Lauretis 1984, 143.

³³ De Lauretis points to the gender of these female monsters being highlighted by their human faces, whereas male monsters such as the Minotaur have heads of animals, and thus the bestial nature of man is highlighted and thus must be overcome (de Lauretis 1984, 110).

Unlike Mulvey, who argued for a trans-sex identification, de Lauretis argues that identification within cinema is not simply masculine. Female spectators can identify with both active masculinity and passive femininity, in other words, they identify with the passive Andromeda of the story rather than the disruptive and powerful Medusa. By identifying with the masculine, the female spectator desires woman, and by identifying with the passive woman onscreen, she desires man to desire her. Thus, the female spectator can gaze, identify, and desire, contrary to Mulvey's argument. Yet, as film is Oedipal, 'women must either consent or be seduced into consenting to femininity' (de Lauretis 1984, 134), because narrative attempts to suppress women's desire, and this is achieved either by men killing women or marrying them. Thus, the sexual difference of man as active and woman as passive image is a culturally constructed effort used to seduce men and women into gender roles. Women are seduced into femininity by identifying with the desired woman onscreen, and men into masculinity, and thus film continues the fictional work of its mythical forbearers. Even in what is termed the 'woman's film', where there is a female protagonist, the male often returns at the end, having fulfilled his journey offscreen, as a form of narrative closure (de Lauretis 1984, 139-140). Thus, although de Lauretis argues that women can have an active desire, this is only used to keep women within a patriarchal system. In order to subvert this, de Lauretis argued that women's active desire should be played to, to reveal that she threatens to 'spill out' of her role of passivity (de Lauretis 1984, 156).³⁴

For both Mulvey and de Lauretis, psychoanalysis reveals the way in which women onscreen are essentially trapped in Oedipal narratives that predominantly fulfil male desires. While their theories can be considered useful to reveal the ways women onscreen can be manifestations of the male imagination, there is little focus on women's multifaceted identities. All identities are complex and de Lauretis, unlike Mulvey, mentions this in her work. In the introductory chapter of *Alice Doesn't* (1984), de Lauretis states that there is a distinction between 'woman' and 'women'. 'Woman' is a 'fictional construct' found in male narratives and on the cinema screen and is a one-dimensional figure who serves to represent sexual difference (de Lauretis 1984, 5). 'Women' on the other hand are the real 'historical beings' who 'cannot as yet be defined outside of those discursive formations' (de Lauretis 1984, 5). Thus, as de Lauretis' focus is on how 'woman' is defined by patriarchy as 'the other-from-man' (de Lauretis 1984, 5), her concern is the construction of a sex difference in

³⁴ De Lauretis continued to develop her theory in her later works, which offered a less sceptical view of women in film, particularly in regard to lesbian desires. For example, see de Lauretis' *The Practice of Love* (1994). However, as mentioned below, this was not used in connection with Medusa.

cinema and how this serves to seduce ‘women’ into socially conditioned roles. Therefore, there is little consideration of a more complex reading of women onscreen as signifying more than simply a sex difference, nor how the multifaceted identities of the women in the audience impact how they watch film. It was in her later works, such as *Technologies of Gender* (1987), that de Lauretis considered women in terms of sexual, racial, and class differences, but this was not explored under the figure of Medusa. It did, however, lead de Lauretis to coin the phrase ‘queer theory’ in 1990. De Lauretis reappropriated the word ‘queer’ from its use as a derogative slur directed at homosexual people and used it to highlight the need to approach various sexual and racial identities. This school of thought continues to highlight that film cannot simply be understood in terms of heteronormative desires, and that other identities that extend beyond gender and sexuality must also be taken into consideration.³⁵ Important for this study is how the monster, and thus Medusa, can be argued to embody, not just this fear of a sex difference then, but queer fears and desires, and this is something I will return to below.

A further limitation of de Lauretis and Mulvey’s theories is that their close reading of Freud leaves little room to argue that women onscreen can be subversive images that actively seek to be looked at. By viewing the women within this thesis as Medusa figures, I argue that there is power in looking and being gazed upon and that these female pop stars actively seek the gaze of their audience. French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous argued for the power of looking directly at Medusa in her essay ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1975). Writing around the same time as Mulvey, Cixous offered a way for women to escape Oedipal narratives. She departed from Freud’s Medusa and argued that it is imperative that women look beyond male writing, beyond this assertion that women signify castration anxiety, to write their own narratives. Thus, rather than creating a feminist reading of Medusa’s myth, Cixous used Medusa as inspiration to create her own feminist theory. In the process, she proposed something akin to her own ‘Medusa lens’.

The Laugh of the Medusa

In ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1975, translated into English in 1976), Cixous critiqued Freud’s use of Medusa, stating that it was another example of men viewing and constructing women as monsters because of their own unconscious anxieties. She addressed how men

³⁵ De Lauretis rejected the phrase almost three years later because ‘it had been taken over by those mainstream forces and institutions it was coined to resist’ (Jagose 1996, 127), in other words, the white male dominance of gay and lesbian studies.

have relied on woman's 'castrated' image in order to instate patriarchy by reducing women to passive figures or punishing powerful women. As women have largely been written about by men, female sexuality has remained a mystery, that 'dark continent' of which Freud spoke, and this has denied women access to themselves, and to their bodies. Using Freud's analysis of Medusa, Cixous exposed how women are viewed through a male lens: 'too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one', with 'one' referring to the imaginary phallus (Cixous 1976, 885). Instead, Cixous stressed the need for women to write their own histories rather than being accomplices to the 'phallogocentric tradition' (Cixous 1976, 879), for women need 'only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning' (Cixous 1976, 885).³⁶ By clearing through the thick layer of fog that men have created around the 'mystery' of woman, and to look at women through their own eyes: 'by writing her-self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger' (1976, 880). Thus, by looking at Medusa directly, rather than through the male lens which is Perseus' shield (the maker of her image), women will see that Medusa is not petrifying but 'beautiful and she's laughing' (Cixous 1976, 885).³⁷ Cixous puts her own spin on the tale, and her essay points to how women can be powerful images when looked at, and this argument is integral to this thesis. For Cixous, the Medusa myth is an analogy for how women must create their own stories in order to regain access to their voice and body, and to escape Oedipal narratives.

A transgressive and feminist way of reading the gaze has therefore been around since Cixous' proposal of looking at a Medusa who laughs. Unlike other second wave feminists such as Mulvey and de Lauretis, who used Freud's phallogocentric reading to create frameworks that view women as homogeneous and their onscreen counterparts as victims who are denied power, Cixous critiqued Freud's reading of Medusa by asserting that the Gorgon can be a powerful and empowering female symbol. Kathleen Rowe, writing in 1995, argues for Cixous' work to be applied to film theory. She states:

Feminist film theory has yet to pursue fully the implications of Medusa's power both to draw Perseus's gaze as spectacle and to fix her own gaze, her 'staring eyes', on him. By using her power to draw his gaze, she can halt his quest for his Oedipal patrimony, robbing him, in fact, of his own eyes. From Cixous's perspective, that

³⁶ 'Phallogocentric' was coined by Ernest Jones, a British psychoanalyst, in 1927.

³⁷ Even though it is Minerva (Athena) who, according to Ovid, turned Medusa into a monster, this goddess was often aligned with male authority (see Deacy 1997), and it is Perseus who reflects her image.

power becomes deadly only because of Perseus's refusal to meet her gaze. A more courageous meeting of her gaze would allow Perseus to apprehend not petrifying monstrosity but beauty: 'You have only to look at the Medusa straight on...' As long as men avert their eyes from her, fearing the sight of her *and* her gaze, 'woman' can be only a phantasm of castration for them, deadly and grotesque. And more important, as long as women do not look at *each other* straight on, they can only see distorted versions of themselves.
Rowe 1995, 10.

Rowe highlights that women have viewed themselves through the eyes of men; they have been denied access to themselves and each other, and encouraged to listen to distorted tales that situate them as monstrous Gorgons (or as 'ideal' sanitised versions of women such as Andromeda). Thus, Rowe uses Cixous' work and builds upon her plea for women to write their own stories to argue for women to create their own image *onscreen* and to be seen on their own terms. I am therefore building on existing Medusa theory but argue that, as well as film, the Gorgon can be used to read images of female pop stars, particularly their music videos.

Methodology

The existing use of Medusa's gaze for framing feminist theory is clear, and this goes beyond simply a reception or feminist reading of Medusa. Rather, it reveals how her myth provides tools useful for analysing women who find empowerment through subversive reclamation of their narratives and image. The ambitious edited collection *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought* (2006), which takes its title from Hélène Cixous' 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975, 1976), discusses how classical myth, more broadly, has inspired feminist thought. As the editors of the collection state: '*Laughing with Medusa* aims to explore how classical myth has been central to the development of feminist thought rather than focusing on feminist interpretations of specific myths' (Zajko. and Leonard 2006, 3). Within the collection, Rachel Bowlby's chapter on Freud details how the classical world became, as Zajko and Leonard state in the introduction, 'for psychoanalysis a means of historicizing and legitimating its clinical findings' (2006, 14). From this, Freud created a phallogocentric theory that provides little in the way of exploring the development of young girls. As has been discussed, Cixous used the Medusa myth as inspiration to create a political piece of feminine writing (*écriture féminine*) that challenged Freud's phallogocentric theory. Medusa was not laughing, as Cixous states, in the ancient texts, but as the editors of the collection note: 'part of the power of Cixous' essay derives from the inscrutable figure of its title...Cixous' use of the Medusa exemplifies the way that mythical figures tend to transcend

the restrictions of their particular textual incarnations. It also shows how the potency of particular receptions transform the mythical figure so that her subsequent and previous identities are profoundly altered' (Zajko. and Leonard 2006, 13-14). Indeed, works such as *The Medusa Reader* (Garber and Vickers eds. 2003) and *Medusa in the Mirror of Time* (Leeming 2013) have detailed how Medusa is influential to many disciplines and discourses, so much so that she has become an enigmatic figure.

At different points in history, Medusa has come to represent and symbolise various ideas that build upon previous receptions of her myth rather than the primary texts. Thus, I am not arguing that the pop stars within this thesis are aware of Medusa as she stands in the ancient texts, but what she has since come to represent. Classical reception explores the 'ways in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imaged and represented' (Hardwick and Stray 2011, 1), but this thesis will not simply look at how Medusa's myth has been received but how it can be used to create a lens through which to analyse female pop stars' use of the monstrous and the construction of their image.

The main material that I will be using Medusa to read will be music videos. Music videos are a distinct art form, and care must be taken to treat them as such. Music theorist Andrew Goodwin (1992) critiques the heavy reliance upon film theory to read music video and warns against an analysis that solely focuses on the image rather than the interplay between image and music (1992, 76 and 17). There are also distinctions between actors and pop stars. For example, in cinema, the audience should be aware that the actor is playing the role of a specific character (although this is not always the case with some devout film fans). The same cannot be said for the pop star in their music video who becomes both narrator (via the song lyrics) and character, and thus their onscreen performance can be viewed as an extension of their personality (Goodwin 1992, 75). This is all part of the singer's 'star image' (Goodwin 1992, 114) and there will usually be several close-ups of the pop star during the music video (Goodwin 1992, 120). The pop star becomes akin to a brand, and what they do must be in keeping with their brand so that they are easier to market to fans. This is not to say, however, that one's 'star image' is fixed. For example, child stars, such as Miley Cyrus, must evolve and depart from their previous pop star persona in order to target a more age-appropriate audience, and Goodwin also explores this in relation to George Michael's transition from band member to solo artist (Goodwin 1992, 120). There is a commercial aspect to deciding what is shown in music videos and, for that reason, there is often a very

cynical view of popstars as ‘sell outs’ who simply use their image in their videos as a marketing tool to help sell their music.

There are also different forms of creative control between actresses and female pop stars. The video and the marketing that goes alongside the release of a song are all inspired by the single’s lyrical content, and thus if the song is written or co-written by the artist, they have a direct influence on how the song is visually presented to the public. Further, pop stars are more inclined to have freedom of movement while they are filmed and onstage as they do not have to strictly follow a script, and many are able to have direct input into how they look, and what their music video, tour, and performances should look. Of course, this does not extend to all female pop stars; the music industry is still very much a male-dominated world.³⁸ I do contend, however, that the women of this thesis are agents over their appearance and in the creation of their videos and photoshoots. This increased level of control has particularly become more visible in recent years through the use of social media, where artists often take their own pictures (usually ‘selfies’), and choose how to present their selves on their various platforms.³⁹ Therefore, rather than being rigorously censored by their labels and management, who are often the real decision makers on what images and music are released, social media is a way to escape the ‘middle man’ and to communicate directly with fans. More creative control, I propose, has enabled the pop stars analysed within this thesis to reclaim access to their bodies

To acknowledge the difference between film and music videos, I will be consulting a range of evidence that goes beyond the pop music video, and this will include an examination of song lyrics, celebrity interviews, and live performances. This will allow the study to consider the pop star’s ‘star image’ and their identity more broadly in relation to their connection with Medusa. Further, to analyse how the pop star uses their image to appeal to the spectator, a large component of this thesis will be the study of pop star and fan relationships and how pop stars can generate diverse responses from their audience. After all, what is particularly interesting is that, even though the main music videos analysed within this thesis all offer visual narratives, because they do not have dialogue, save for the music that plays over the video and which works alongside the visual narrative, multiple storylines

³⁸ See Smith et al’s 2020 report.

³⁹ I use ‘their selves’ here to point to how the construction of self is a deliberate strategy used by pop stars for marketing purposes, but also, as this thesis argues, to make certain statements relating to identity.

can exist at the same time (Vernallis 1998, 176). This can arguably be read as a tactic used by artists to appeal to a more diverse audience. As Carol Vernallis says:

it may be in a video's interest to point only vaguely to a narrative. If the image were overly narrative in orientation, we might be drawn to the image as we are in a traditional film. The music for the video would most likely resemble film music - usually unacknowledged, almost unheard.
Vernallis 1998, 175.

To explore how fans engage with these music videos and the modes of spectatorial identification offered, I will cover a range of material, including fan art, comments, and studies that investigate fandoms. Henry Jenkins' study of 'participatory culture' is a particularly useful way through which to view such material. As technology develops, it is easier for fans to access music videos and images on demand, and even to instantly interact with pop stars on their social media accounts. Pop stars and the music industry have taken advantage of this. Across various platforms, pop stars display their star image with some level of continuity. For example, Lady Gaga as a monster is not confined to her music but can also be used as a marketing tactic used to sell her merchandise and her perfume called *Fame* (2012). Further, Azealia Banks does not just use classical and fairy tale imagery in her 'Ice Princess' music video, but also across her work. This use of consistent themes across multimedia encourages fans to view pop stars in certain ways, while new technology has changed the way audiences receive and engage with this material. As Jenkins says, new tools have made it possible for fans to 'archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content' (2006, 135). For example, fans have taken images of Gaga online and altered them on their computers and then published these works as pieces of fan art (see chapters four and five). Pop stars and the music industry exploit this to encourage fans and audiences to engage with the various forms of media they are producing, and this leads to 'active modes of spectatorship' (Jenkins 2006, 136). By considering new forms of technology and its effect on 'media consumers', Jenkins argues that spectators are not simply being manipulated by the media, nor are they completely autonomous:

It would be naïve to assume that powerful conglomerates will not protect their own interests as they enter this new media marketplace, but at the same time, audiences are gaining greater power and autonomy as they enter into the new knowledge culture. The interactive audience is more than a marketing concept and less than 'semiotic democracy'.
Jenkins 2006, 136.

Thus, while Gaga might encourage fans to view her as a monster, fans still have a level of creative freedom, with many deciding to interpret Gaga as a specific monster: Medusa.

Fans often refer to music stars as their ‘idols’ and thus there are studies of fan and celebrity relationships that interpret this relationship as akin to a religious experience, such as those of Chris Rojek (2007).⁴⁰ Michael Williams similarly explores this in relation to the classical world and early cinema. In *Film Stardom, Myth and Classicism* (2013), Williams discusses the origins of cinema and how early film stars were compared (literally) to the Greco-Roman gods and goddesses; for example, actress Joan Crawford was depicted as the Venus de Milo sculpture in magazine *Photoplay* in 1928 (Williams 2013, 1). This was because the Greek gods were anthropomorphic and their depictions in art and sculptures reflected physical ideals prevalent during the 1920s (Williams 2013, 2). An analysis of this comparison between ancient gods and film stars can be a useful way to explore the relationship between fans and the celebrity. Fans ‘worship’ these stars and participate in a reciprocal relationship, for both fan and celebrity rely on each other. While fans pay money to get access to the celebrity, the celebrity relies on their fans for successful sales. This replicates in many ways the reciprocal relationship between mortals and gods, with the former leaving sacrifices and offerings to a deity in exchange for good fortune. Thus, celebrities’ devotees are not passive receivers, but active participants (as has also been highlighted above in relation to fandom). While early film stars were viewed as gods in the 1920s, audiences continue to view celebrities in similar terms. As Williams says: ‘stars are *not* gods, and yet an institutionalised discourse apparently would have us believe that they are, and fans certainly behave at times as if they are too’ (Williams 2013, 17). Pete Ward in *Gods Behaving Badly* (2011), in a similar vein to Williams, argues that celebrities can be viewed as the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece and Rome because, while these gods were venerated, they were also flawed for they often displayed very human emotions, such as jealousy. In this sense, celebrities, like the gods and goddesses of the ancient world, are idolised but are also very human (Ward 2011, 6).

While the above scholars offer ways to use religion and the classics to read celebrities, I am not simply focusing on these pop stars as akin to the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece and Rome, but drawing comparison with a classical monster. What this thesis asks is: why the monster? What are we to make of female pop stars who willingly become

⁴⁰ The word ‘idol’ is from the Greek ‘eidolon’, meaning ‘image’. Plato viewed images (and art) through the concept of ‘mimesis’ and as constructed and an interpretation of an ‘original’ (*Republic* 10.596-599).

monsters, and what is it about Medusa, and more broadly the monstrous-feminine, that ‘speaks’ to the audience? Thus, while I still engage with the notion of the goddess, my broader theoretical framework is women who subvert the monstrous. To read this relationship, I will take the approach of using monster theory to build upon existing audience and gaze theories to establish why pop stars’ use of Medusa and the monstrous is attractive to fans. Religious terminology, however, will still be drawn upon as a tool for exploring how celebrities are challenging notions of the sacred and the abject by using the monstrous to redefine boundaries, particularly in their appeal to a diverse audience that constitutes various identities that extend beyond a male and female binary (while also, in some respect, challenging certain religious narratives that can depict women and queer people in a negative light).

To explore why the monster appeals to such a diverse audience, I will use monster theory in conjunction with queer theory. Film theorist Harry M. Benshoff argues that the monster can be read as queer in that ‘queer is also insistent that issues of race, gender, disability, and class be addressed within its politics’ (2015, 119). Thus, while Barbara Creed (1993), whose theories I will explain in detail in a further chapter, argues that the monster is almost exclusively connected with fears of the female body, with even male monsters being feminised because they are usually penetrated in an act of violence, for example, by a crucifix (Creed 1993b, 118), it also becomes clear that the monster can symbolise much more. This is evident in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s influential ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’ (1996) where he explains the makings of a monster. He argues that monsters reflect specific cultural fears (thesis one) of the ‘Other’ (thesis four – where the ‘Other’ can include, but is not limited to, gender, race, class, disability and sexuality) (Cohen 1996, 7).⁴¹ Crucially, thesis six of Cohen’s monster theory points to, not just the fear the monster evokes, but desire: ‘the monster also attracts’ (Cohen 1996, 16). This is because the monster symbolises those repressed desires that we try to expiate. Desire is a key element of film theory, and it is used to understand why viewers are attracted to, and how they engage or identify with, images onscreen.

Thus, just as Medusa was created to reflect Greek fears of women and the barbarian Other, as a monster she continues to develop to reflect the fears and desires of the time. The Gorgon can embody much more than simply a fear of sex difference, as Freud read her.

⁴¹ I will not be giving an in-depth analysis of each thesis here.

Using queer studies as part of the Medusa lens, it can be established why and how Medusa and the monster can appeal to a very diverse audience that goes beyond a male/female binary. This leads to a consideration of how variations in identity, such as sex, gender, class, race, affect the way one identifies with onscreen images, and goes beyond the male and female dichotomy of early film theory. In the figure of Medusa, queer theory must be used to show that the women in this thesis cannot be reduced to their sexual ‘difference’, but that something more is going on here, and this will point to these women’s complex female identities as well as the identities of the spectator. Thus, while feminist theories have begun to create a Medusa lens, this has not been applied to music video, or to read audience identification with the image that extends well beyond a male and female gaze but acknowledges how a wide range of identities affect the way we receive images and how they appeal to the audience.

This study will therefore fill a gap in current academia and research on Medusa. Gillian M. E. Alban’s work *The Medusa Gaze in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (2017), for example, investigates the Gorgon specifically in modern literature, while Liz Gloyd’s *Tracking Classical Monsters in Popular Culture* (2020) takes a very different approach to my thesis. Gloyd’s work is the first book dedicated to analysing classical monsters in popular culture and argues that monsters can represent distinct fears and desires, an opinion that I share. Gloyd’s chapter on Medusa particularly focuses on Rihanna as the Gorgon, as I do in chapter one, but she makes no mention of Medusa as a significant figure in psychoanalysis and film theory, for she rejects psychoanalysis because of its focus on sex differences. However, as I will show, by critiquing and using psychoanalysis in conjunction with film and queer gaze theory, a framework can be created that provides a rich analysis of the monster and which reveals that Medusa is a figure that draws a range of responses and meanings that go well beyond Freud’s sex difference to show what the Gorgon is *doing* in modern popular culture.

The Medusa Lens

The ‘Medusa lens’ I propose as a way of reading female pop stars therefore takes an interdisciplinary approach to analyse new material. It will critique and build upon existing uses of Medusa in film theory to read images of female pop stars who have either become or are read as the Gorgon. It will posit that the existing use of Medusa in feminist film theory can be challenged and built upon, to show that women can have agency and power while

being objects of the gaze. By focusing on the gaze, the thesis will explore the ways in which pop stars are actively seducing the look of their fans. Further, by framing my argument from a queer perspective, as Benshoff defines it above, it will create a more inclusive way of reading audience engagement and identification with the image. This will be used to argue that pop stars acknowledge their diverse fan base and manipulate their image by using the monstrous in order to encourage spectatorial identification. The thesis will contend that the female pop stars of this thesis are all modern Medusas who look and demand to be looked at, and it will analyse why the monstrous-feminine so appeals to the spectator, and what it can reveal about the pop star herself.

The thesis will also explore how modern audiences continue to engage with and subvert Medusa's mythology. What will also become evident throughout my analysis is that these pop stars are not simply inspired by Medusa or by extension classical myth but draw on a range of imagery that forms their symbolic repertoire. There is clear engagement with myth and fairy tales, and I argue that these pop stars are putting their own twist on these narratives to challenge and reappropriate male-defined, or patriarchal-constructed, stereotypes or tropes of femininity. As mentioned above, Freud viewed myth and fairy tale as similar because, in psychoanalytic terms, they are both manifestations of unconscious desires. While there may be a particular version of a myth or a fairy tale that becomes best-known, there are usually several versions of these stories that exists, and which are moulded to reflect the period they are written. Additionally, as the written versions of these tales that survive today are mostly recorded by men, it is these male authors who have decided what to include or discard in these tales. Therefore, like myths, fairy tales often reflect gender ideals that dictate 'proper' male and female behaviour.⁴² To quote Jack Zipes in *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*, myths and fairy tales are 'historically and culturally coded, and their ideological impact is great' (1994, 4). For that reason, it is important to understand how women in the modern day are, essentially, re-writing these narratives from a female perspective.

The reappropriation of Medusa in pop music shows how myth can be adapted for different purposes in the modern day. Medusa's myth is therefore not stagnant, it is still changing and developing and has clear resonance in popular culture. The thesis raises questions concerning the role and reception of the classics today, and significantly how

⁴² It is important to note here that while women were the initial creators of the fairy tale genre and 'played a more dynamic role in establishing the fairy tale to subvert the more classical genres', male authors such as Charles Perrault had a much more long-lasting cultural effect with their work, which often presented idealistic gendered behaviour (Zipes 2006, 32).

certain narratives that are perpetuated must be challenged. The women of this thesis, I argue, are reclaiming their own narratives and access to their own bodies by revelling in both their sexuality and a monstrosity that has so closely been aligned with women. I would also like to add that I am not arguing that women are not still subject to demeaning, and reductive, sexualised roles onscreen. What I am arguing is that the women in this thesis, analysed through this Medusa lens, are in charge of their own images. There is a clear difference between being reduced to a sex object or a monster by men, and a woman being sexual or creating her own monstrous identity on her own terms. Thus, rather than viewing these pop stars as ‘sell-outs’ who use their bodies as commodities to sell sex and controversy simply for monetary gain, by viewing these women through a Medusa lens, I contend that what they are doing with their image is subversive as they empower themselves as women, as well as their diverse audience. *Pop! Medusa* thus shows how these pop stars are directly, or indirectly, ‘popping’ the way Medusa has been used in ancient myth, in psychoanalysis, and film theory to argue that, when women are looked at directly rather than through a male lens (such as Perseus’ shield), they can be powerful images, too, and that they are not simply the object of a male gaze.

Chapter Summaries

The thesis will begin with an analysis of Rihanna’s image as Medusa on the front cover of *GQ* magazine (2013). It is the only chapter of this thesis that will focus on a magazine cover, and thus a still image, rather than a music video. However, I still contend that Rihanna’s reappropriation of the Gorgon here delivers a narrative, for use of Medusa is still an engagement with her story. For this chapter, I will be introducing Black women’s identification with Medusa that is predominantly based on the long and complex history of Black hair. While Black women (and men) have been called ‘Medusa’ derogatively because of a perceived similarity between the Gorgon’s snake locks and untreated Black locked hair, Black women are reclaiming Medusa as a positive and empowering symbol. Using this to inform my discussion, I shall argue that Rihanna’s heavily sexualised image as Medusa can be subversive and can be interpreted differently by different spectators. For example, while straight men may not pick up on a reading of Rihanna as proudly displaying untreated Black hair, a Black female audience surely would. Therefore, the appeal of the image goes beyond a male gaze. It points to how Medusa can be used to explore race and gender, and points to a gaze theory that goes beyond a male and female dichotomy, while also exploring Black men and women’s engagement with the classics more broadly.

This analysis of Medusa, race, and the gaze shall continue in chapter two that focuses on Black female rapper Azealia Banks' reappropriation of the Gorgon in her 2015 music video 'Ice Princess'. While I read Banks' use of Medusa here in relation to Black women's experience, this is in very different terms to Rihanna. This is principally because the video offers a narrative that is rich in both classical and fairy tale symbolism to show Banks as a *white* Medusa-Snow Queen hybrid that literally freezes her enemy with her icy gaze. To understand the significance of a Black woman with a petrifying gaze, I shall use feminist bell hooks' oppositional gaze theory. This will be used to analyse Banks' Medusa gaze, but also applied to further understand her use of classical and fairy tale narratives in the video and elsewhere. It will reveal how Medusa can yet again be used to explore the relationship between the image and the diverse gazes in the audience, emphasising how the Black female spectator has been negated in much of gaze and feminist film theory, while also revealing that a connection between Medusa and Black women is much deeper than simply a perceived similarity with the hair.

While these two chapters establish how Medusa can be used to explore the gaze in terms of race and gender, chapter three shall begin my consideration of how the Gorgon can be used to read pop stars who are simply read as, rather than become, Medusa. This is where I argue that my Medusa lens can be applied to read the power of women's images more broadly. As I have mentioned, Madonna was read by Julie Brown as Medusa, and it is implied that this was in response to the pop star's incessant need to fixate the gaze of her audience. To explore how Madonna constructs herself as a spectacle, I will analyse three of Madonna's music videos so chosen because the songs all appear in Madonna's *Blonde Ambition* tour (which Brown parodied), but also because they use film narratives inspired by films of the inter-war and post Second World War periods. From these films, Madonna parodies the feminine tropes of the vamp and the dumb blonde, women who deceive men with their beautiful appearance and who actively seek to be looked at. These figures point to an internal feminine monstrosity and embody men's distrust of women, and David Leeming even connects the beautiful Medusa to the femme fatale (a later incarnation of the vamp) who seduces men while concealing her hidden danger.⁴³ Madonna does not simply recreate these

⁴³ Note that although the femme fatale is a later incarnation of the vamp and is depicted in the films of the 1940s and early 50s in response to women's changed position in a post-war society and the fears surrounding this, Leeming uses the femme fatale and applies it to the Middle Ages and Renaissance. This was a time when Christians feared that women could prevent the 'advancement of the male soul', and thus Medusa as a beautiful woman became an allegory for attractive women who could transfix and distract men, thus their exterior disguised an internal monstrosity that related to the distrust of women (Leeming 2013, 32).

films but parodies them by similarly using her image to knowingly play with the gaze, but she also employs codes that go well beyond a straight male audience to appeal to a queer gaze. This can be read as a way that she appeals to as broad an audience as possible, for she relies upon her fans for her success. Using Kathleen Rowe's use of Medusa in her film theory, I argue this can be applied to Madonna to interpret her as a pop star who controls what she looks like and how she is viewed, and as a modern Medusa whose powerful image knowingly fixates the gaze of her audience.

Madonna is very much a source of inspiration for Lady Gaga (Lady Gaga to *NME* magazine, Goodwyn 2011), and it is this pop star who I analyse next in chapter four. While Madonna may play with an internal monstrosity, Gaga visually adopts the monstrous-feminine as part of her pop star image, and I propose that this is how she seduces the gaze of her audience. I will give an analysis of why the monster may attract Gaga's fans, particularly her queer fan base, and the ways in which her monstrous image offers spectatorial identification. Though I use this to explore why this has led fans to interpret Gaga as Medusa in their fan art, I also give my own view on the similarities between pop star and Gorgon. Using Barbara Creed's reading of Medusa in her horror film theory, which critiques and builds upon Freud, in conjunction with Medusa's myth as it is found in Ovid, I contend that both Medusa and Lady Gaga can be read as victims of male violence who are subsequently transformed into monsters that symbolise fear of the castrating female genitals: the vagina dentata. The crucial difference between the two is that while Medusa is changed involuntarily, Gaga consciously chooses to reappropriate the monster as part of an artistic way of empowering herself in a male-dominated industry.

In the second chapter on Lady Gaga, which should be viewed as an extension of the first, I will continue to use Creed's work to explore Gaga's later role as 'Mother Monster'. I will continue to analyse how Gaga, as a monstrous mother, encourages fans to identify with her in a shared monstrous identity. Here, I will argue that the pop star adheres to Julia Kristeva's notion of *abjection* that evokes the undifferentiated union with the mother in the pre-Oedipal period. As Kristeva used Medusa in her later work, I will argue that Medusa is a monstrous mother who is again apt for reading the desires Gaga is playing to, and the way she is seducing the gaze and using the monstrous to her own advantage. It is in this chapter that Lacan will be particularly useful, since he argues that the union between child and mother is broken upon entering the mirror stage when the infant begins to see itself as a separate subject. However, in an interesting nuance, the mother can also be used as a mirror

herself and as a parent who can validate the infant's newfound individuality. The mother is therefore still key for the development of one's identity, and I argue that this can draw an interesting comparison with Perseus who, when looking in the shield's mirror reflection, sees Medusa's visage rather than his own. This points to how the mother cannot truly be separated from, and again forms an interesting way to view the relationship between Gaga as a Mother Monster who urges her fans to share in her monstrous identity and to use her as a mirror to find their own reflection. In doing so, I argue that Gaga removes the monster from its exclusively negative connotations and transforms it into a symbol that can empower those who may, for many reasons such as sexuality or a history of being bullied, already feel Othered.

The main theme in this thesis is Medusa's gaze and the monstrous, but there are also several other sub-themes taken from her myth that run throughout this work. These include the theme of *hybridity*, which I argue reflects these women's multifaceted identities; and the importance of the *mirror* and seeing oneself reflected onscreen. There are also other themes that emerge which go beyond Medusa's tale, such as the use of fairy tales, which I argue further highlights how these pop stars are taking existing forms of storytelling to create their own narratives. Consistent is how these women are challenging existing narratives of the monstrous-feminine and by reading them through my proposed Medusa lens, it becomes clear that the Gorgon's myth is very much alive and that these women continue to tell her story as modern Medusas.

Chapter 1

‘Medusa? Medusa Black!’: African Hair and the Subversive Potential of Rihanna’s Gorgon on the Front Cover of *GQ* Magazine

On the front cover of the December 2013 issue of British *GQ* (Gentleman’s Quarterly) magazine, a Gorgon stared seductively, her arms raised to cover her bare breasts, while the fanged snakes that formed her hair threatened to dart towards the reader (fig. 1.1). This was the African Caribbean pop star Rihanna as Medusa, directed by artist Damien Hirst and photographed by Mariano Vivanco, in celebration of the magazine’s twenty-fifth anniversary. Heavily sexualised, the image is clearly intended to excite and seduce heterosexual *men* into buying the magazine. However, the image also invites a racial reading, for Medusa has a history of being associated with Black women.⁴⁴ Ranging from poetry, art, and stage performance, Medusa has been used as an empowering figure for many who reclaim her from her monstrous origins and view her as a beautiful symbol of Black female authenticity because her snake hair resembles African locks. This reclaiming predominantly reflects Western society’s treatment of African hair, which has a long political history. African hair has always been more than just hair, it has had ‘social aesthetic and spiritual significance’ for thousands of years (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 7). During the trans-Atlantic slave trade, slavers would shave African hair as a way of disconnecting the enslaved from Africa and their culture (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 10). When the hair grew back, the once carefully manipulated hair styles were unkempt and, because Black hair also differed in texture to European hair, led some white people to derogatively refer to it as ‘wool’ in a bid to dehumanize the enslaved (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 13-14).⁴⁵

Although African hair is diverse (in much the same way as European hair is), the uniting factor is the way it continues to be a source of conflict and politics in Western societies. This is evident, for example, in schools and workplaces which view hairstyles that

⁴⁴ She is not the only figure appropriated from Greek mythology as symbol of Black female experience. For example, Kara Walker’s *Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014), where the sphinx, a hybrid-creature taken from both Egyptian and Greek mythology, is used by Walker as symbol of enslaved Black women’s role and abuse in the sugar trade. Further, Liz Gloyd in *Tracking Classical Monsters in Popular Culture* (2020) discusses the television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995-1999) and the use of Centaurs as a metaphor for racism against African Americans (2020, 90-91)

⁴⁵ See *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (Byrd and Tharps, 2014) for a full history.

have cultural significance to Black men and women as unprofessional and a fashion statement. It is particularly Black women who are pressured to process their hair so that it appears ‘less Black’ by beauty magazines and advertising campaigns that perpetuate notions of beauty as linked with smooth textured European hair. This has led Black women living in the West to wear weaves, wigs, extensions, or to chemically straighten their hair, which can be harmful but also hides a part of their identity. Therefore, Black hair, to quote Emma Dabiri, author of *Don’t Touch My Hair* (2019), is ‘never just hair’, it is unavoidably political (speaking to Natalie Morris for *Metro* newspaper in 2019).⁴⁶

Due to the relationship between Black women and Medusa because of the hair, I argue that a Black woman on the front cover of a men’s magazine as the Gorgon, and the first woman in my chosen case studies to *become* Medusa, may have subversive potential for both the pop star and the Black female spectator. Framing my argument via the gaze, it will raise questions regarding agency and whether Rihanna agreed to become the Gorgon to send a certain message via her image. To begin my analysis, I consider why Damien Hirst initially chose Rihanna to embody Medusa.



Fig. 1.1. Rihanna on the front cover of *GQ* magazine, December 2013.

⁴⁶ The same title as singer Solange’s song ‘Don’t Touch My Hair’ (2016), which echoes the same sentiment.

Why Medusa?

On the fifth of September 2013, in Brooklyn, New York, Rihanna arrived ready for her photoshoot with Hirst. *GQ* writer Jonathan Heaf watched the scene unfold, describing Rihanna's Barbadian accent: 'curving and stretching her vowels like bowed palms in a sea breeze. She's a siren' (Heaf 2013, 344). The Sirens are the hybrid half-bird women of Greek myth and Heaf draws a comparison here because of Rihanna's Barbadian descent, a country that evokes sprawling beaches and the sea (the sea being where the Sirens lured men to their deaths), but also because of its more modern definition to describe a beautiful woman.⁴⁷ Heaf continues that the day is spent by the two artists, Rihanna and Hirst, *collaborating* on 'an art project that will see Hirst play tempter to Rihanna's Eve' (2013, 344).⁴⁸ It seems that, although Hirst originally suggested the project and its use of Medusa, Rihanna clearly had input.⁴⁹ The decision to use Medusa originated two months prior to the photoshoot, which was almost called off twice, with one of those occasions playing out as follows:

Hirst to Rihanna (SMS): 'I'm not doing it.'
Rihanna to Hirst (SMS): 'I'm a gonna kill ya then'.
Heaf 2013, 344.

The exchange clearly reveals how much Rihanna wanted to do the photoshoot, as well as playfully showing that she is very much a woman in control.

Four days after the shoot in Brooklyn, Hirst and Heaf met again in London, where Hirst, a team of creatives, and snake handlers, were constructing the snake hair of Medusa that would later be superimposed onto the images of Rihanna taken in New York. During this interview, which was published to accompany the images of Rihanna inside *GQ*, Hirst described how the pop star had previously failed to show up to meetings between herself and the artist and that he is 'flattered' she had turned up for the *GQ* shoot (qtd. in Heaf 2013, 345).⁵⁰ Hirst was asked why he decided to photograph Rihanna as the Gorgon, and he replied that it was because 'she's badass!' (qtd. in Heaf 2013, 345). Heaf asked whether this was in

⁴⁷ Note that the Sirens did not live in the sea, 'they sit in a meadow' Homer, *Odyssey* 12.39 ff (trans. W. Shewring).

⁴⁸ Heaf's choice of words in this write-up (Eve and Siren) both play on the trope of the woman who is inherently deceptive, something that, according to Leeming who I have quoted elsewhere in this thesis, argues that Medusa also played to as a 'femme fatale-like' figure (2013, 32).

⁴⁹ Note this was not the first time Hirst had produced an image of a beautiful Gorgon. In Hirst's *Myths, Monsters and Legends* (2011) the white model Dani Smith is shown as black (in colour, rather than race) Medusa.

⁵⁰ It is this interview that accompanies the photoshoot inside, rather than an interview with Rihanna. We do not hear her stance on Medusa.

reference to Medusa or Rihanna and Hirst replied ‘both’, continuing, ‘Rihanna is bad...If you’re a mother, she’s a proper terror, isn’t she? How many 14-year-old girls are smoking weed because of Rihanna?’ (qtd. in Heaf 2013, 345). Hirst views Rihanna as a strong pop star who empowers her legions of female fans, and who reflects his impression of the Gorgon as a powerful ‘badass’, adding: ‘I’d rather follow Rihanna than David Cameron. She’s strong and I think she’s making a generation of women strong. She’s an unlikely role model, yet hugely successful’ (qtd. in Heaf 2013, 345). In this sense, he is viewing Medusa’s monstrousness positively, and in terms of the rebellious female spirit.

However, this front cover is not aimed at a female audience. *GQ* is a men’s magazine that, although in recent years has made moves to become much more inclusive by incorporating articles written from women’s perspectives, has a history of reducing women to sex objects.⁵¹ In 2013, the same year as Rihanna’s front cover issue, the magazine ran a ‘The 100 Hottest Women of the 21st Century’ list. This was a list not dissimilar to ones the magazine repeatedly compiles; however, this particular compilation included categories such as, ‘This year’s hot Chinese chick’ (given to actress Zhang Ziyi), and ‘This year’s hot Indian chick’ (given to actress Freida Pinto) (*GQ* January 2013 online, paperback February 2013). The magazine faced backlash from many online blogs and other magazine outlets with a repeated criticism being that these titles suggested that ‘women of certain ethnicities are only “sexy” in relation to their own race, while others are deemed universally attractive’ (Driscoll 2013). Thus, Hirst’s reading of Medusa seems to sit at odds with a magazine that has a history of producing reductive, and often harmful, images of women for a heterosexual male, and predominantly white, gaze. His reading of an empowered pop star seems to be lost and this sexualised Medusa appears as an object for the male gaze. Yet, a ‘beautiful’ Medusa is not a new concept, but one that originates in the ancient world. Medusa was a hybrid woman in ancient Greece who was often portrayed as a combination of feminine monstrosity. This has been interpreted by modern historians as a mythical manifestation of male fears regarding women and a bid to control women’s power and sexuality (discussed below). Therefore, to

⁵¹ A thread on *Reddit* from 2018 particularly highlights this more progressive approach from the magazine in recent years. A concerned reader of *GQ* begins the thread with the question, ‘When did *GQ* magazine switch from being a men’s magazine to being a feminist/SJW magazine?’ (Darkace7 2018). The user, under the name *darkace7*, continues, ‘It’s supposed to be for men but the magazine actually includes feminist writers and feminist rhetoric. It’s like if Ms Magazine let MRAs write for them. It’s very strange.’ (Darkace7 2018). The move to include feminist issues can likely be explained in response to changes in society, particularly the #metoo movement, which can be regarded as becoming a global movement in 2017.

argue that Rihanna's sexualised Medusa is an empowered figure, the blend of feminine beauty and monstrosity found in the hybrid Medusa of the ancient world must be explored.

The Beautiful Medusa: From Antiquity to Popular Culture

During the archaic period of Greece, Medusa tended to be depicted as a hybrid androgynous monster. Her face was an amalgamation of various animal parts that could include boar-like tusks, snakes in her hair, and an oversized tongue that resembled that of a dog. She would frequently be shown wearing a beard, and there was little to suggest femininity, humanity, or beauty. However, during the Greek classical period, there was a transition regarding the portrayal of female monsters. In an interview with Sumi Hansen, Kiki Karoglou, the curator of the exhibit 'Dangerous Beauty in the Ancient World' exhibit at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 2018) discussed the artistic development of hybrid creatures in ancient Greece. She explained that during the classical period, hybrid creatures such as Medusa, the Sirens, and the Sphinx, were feminised and made beautiful. Medusa during this period transitions from hideous monster with tusks and stuck out tongue, to a very human and pleasant faced woman, her only remnant of physical monstrosity her snake hair (or snakes weaved into her hair, as discussed in the Introduction) that continued to render her a hybrid monster. Karoglou believes that the feminisation of these creatures '...comes hand in hand with the demonization of women. It's an issue of control of female sexuality and power' (Karoglou speaking to Hansen 2018).⁵² By combining the monstrous with feminine beauty, and thus highlighting the monster's gender while disguising their inherently monstrous qualities, these figures can be viewed as being the product of male fear regarding women who could not be trusted. It perpetuated the notion that women needed to be controlled by order-restoring male heroes.⁵³

Medusa can be depicted as either grotesque or a hybrid feminine beauty, and both are found in the ancient world. Italian Renaissance paintings of Medusa, for example, tended to portray her as the beauty who could steer the good Christian man away from spiritual progression by luring his gaze, and turning him to stone with her own petrifying look (Leeming 2013, 32 – see footnote 43). It shows that Medusa can be manipulated to suit the gender ideals of whoever is appropriating and recreating her image. This is also apparent in

⁵² Note, there also existed male hybrid creatures such as the Minotaur and the Centaurs, but the number of female creatures outnumber the male. Further, the male hybrids were not always so evil. A rare exception is the wise Chiron, see Dunstan Lowe's *Monsters and Monstrosity in Augustan Poetry* (2015, 180-182).

⁵³ Draws comparison with Felton's argument, with women being aligned with nature and men culture. See Introduction.

mid-twentieth to twenty-first century depictions of the Gorgon in film. Hirst's Medusa follows a gradual trend in pop culture that leans towards the Gorgon as a dangerous, feminine woman. This development can be particularly viewed in the following films: *The Gorgon* (1964), where the eponymous character is not overtly sexualised and is played by actress Prudence Hyman who was turned fifty years old at the time of filming (considerably older than the female lead Barbara Shelley [aged thirty-two at the time]—the film industry is one that considers younger women as more desirable), and wore scaled make-up on her face; *Clash of the Titans* (1981) with Ray Harryhausen's stop-motion clay model Medusa, who is in 'full monster' mode; *Clash of the Titans* (2010) where blonde Russian model Natalia Vodianova becomes half human, who wears a bralette and has snakes for hair, with the bottom half of her body that of a giant snake (following Harryhausen's design and thus resembling something much like a snake version of a mermaid); and *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2010) where Uma Thurman plays the glamorous ex-girlfriend of Poseidon and conceals her only two monstrous features of petrifying eyes and snake hair with clever fashion accessories.⁵⁴ This gradual beautification of Medusa increases the focus on her gender. It reflects the use of modern technology, where CGI (computer-generated imagery) can be used to create a more convincing human and monster hybrid, but also social concerns regarding monsters (Gloyn 2020, 148). In Harryhausen's creation, the Gorgon is the monstrous obstacle for Perseus; in the remake it is her femininity that serves in 'contrast to the human masculinity of Perseus himself', it separates the genders and thus reflects contemporary concerns regarding women taking and entering typically 'male' roles, for example in the workplace; and in *Percy Jackson* Thurman's Medusa embodies the 'stereotypes about rejected older women and patterns of revenge which have become staples of twentieth and twenty-first-century soap operas and thrillers' (Gloyn 2020, 148-9). Her monstrousness is entwined with concerns regarding women.

Therefore, the gradual feminisation of Medusa in popular culture has origins in the ancient world where it was arguably used as a device to disempower women. After all, it seems that Medusa is *created* by men to be subdued by a man who restores order (note that the above films were all written and directed by men). Yet, as will be explored below, and to reiterate what has already been established, the Medusa that featured on the cover of *GQ* is a collaborative product of the artist and his muse working together. This is not the case of man

⁵⁴ Although, in *Clash of the Titans* (2010) Medusa's human face is replaced with that of a horrifying computer-generated snake when she attacks.

as maker of woman's image here, it is more nuanced. There is also an obvious racial difference, for Rihanna is one of very few prominent Black women to become Medusa, for the women who play Medusa in film are all white (save for Harryhausen's creation), even though the Gorgon was given an African origin (discussed below and the Introduction).⁵⁵ Further, unlike Medusa in film, Rihanna's Medusa *does not lose her head*.

The Significance of the Head: Where's Perseus?

In film, Medusa overwhelmingly serves, as she did in ancient myth, as the obstacle that the hero must overcome. She is rarely the focus and simply adds to the male protagonist's heroism. Rihanna, in contrast, is not decapitated; she stands full bodied and thus there is no suggestion of Perseus, or a 'Perseus figure', as a part of her narrative.⁵⁶ An autonomous Gorgon who stands without her oppressor draws significant parallels with Rihanna's personal, and very public, experience of male violence. Rihanna, in 2009, was assaulted by her then boyfriend, Chris Brown. In January 2013, and after several months of speculation, Rihanna declared she had rekindled her romance with Brown, saying: 'Even if it's a mistake, it's my mistake' (qtd. in Dray 2013). Later that year, and by the time of the *GQ* photoshoot, the relationship was broken off again. Rihanna as Medusa stands alone without her Perseus, without Chris Brown, her assaulter. As Brown said, he had felt like a 'monster' when he had attacked Rihanna in 2009 (qtd. in Beaumont-Thomas 2017). Rihanna literally becomes monstrous in her *GQ* shoot, and it leads to the question of who is the monster: Medusa or Perseus? It also flips the mythical script: What does Medusa symbolise if she is not the beheaded victim of a male's story?

The significance of the beheading of Medusa is explored by Molly M. Levine in 'The Gendered Grammar of Ancient Mediterranean Hair', who explains that a woman's long flowing hair was 'a mark of fertility and sexuality' in the ancient world, particularly in mythology (1995, 91). Levine gives the examples of goddesses, such as Hera and her 'ambrosial locks' (Homer, *Iliad* 14.175-77), and other female figures such as the 'rich-haired

⁵⁵ Similarly, in computer games Medusa is often shown as a white woman (*Gods and Heroes Rome Rising*, 2011). In slot machine games, Medusa is an especially popular figure and is overwhelmingly white (for example, *Medusa I: The Curse of Athena*, 2018; *Medusa II: The Quest of Perseus*, 2017 (a year earlier, oddly) and *Medusa's Lair*, 2014). The slot machine game *Medusa's Gaze* (2013), where Medusa is a woman of colour, seems to be one of the rare exceptions.

⁵⁶ There are images from the ancient world of Medusa with her head attached. The Temple of Artemis in Corfu, for example, shows a full-bodied Medusa with her children, Chrysaor and Pegasus, on either side of her. However, Rainer Mack (2002) suggests that this still alludes to her decapitation by Perseus, for her children are only born once the hero has cut off her head (2002, 585).

Danaë' (Hesiod, *The Shield of Heracles* 216ff) (1995, 91). Medusa's hair in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is described as particularly attractive, that is, until she is violated by Neptune. This sexual act that pollutes the sanctity of Minerva's temple is punishable by turning Medusa's hair into snakes. Therefore, to quote Levine:

For the women of epic, rich, fair hair is a positive attribute. The same quality of luxuriant hair, however, may assume a negative valence in contexts where female fertility and/or sexuality are viewed with suspicion and disparagement.
Levine 1995, 92.

Therefore, when women transgress their gender role, their hair takes on a different meaning. This leads Levine to conclude that, 'in the ideal world of myth the final solution is to remove woman's hair and head altogether' (Levine 1995, 92). Therefore, Medusa's tale can be read via comparative use of other Greco-Roman mythology and interpreted as the creation of a hybrid female monster who is decapitated in order to control her sexuality, even if sex with Neptune is described as a violation or a rape by Ovid, and to subdue her power.⁵⁷

When applying this to Rihanna's Gorgon, where the head remains intact, it seems to make a case for a woman in the twenty-first century who can flaunt her sexuality without punishment. Yet, this can be taken further. Yes, *GQ* tends to objectify women, but around the time of Rihanna's cover, there was a shift in views regarding pornographic images of women in magazines. In 2012, Lucy-Anne Holmes began a campaign called *No More Page 3*. The campaign was directed towards British newspaper *The Sun's* page three feature of nude female models. In August 2013, the Irish version of the paper ceased to use this feature and the UK edition followed suit in 2015. Further, in April 2013 *Huffington Post* ran an article that explored the relationship between *The Daily Star's* page three feature and rape culture. It found that comments left on the digital version of the paper often had sexually violent messages that led the paper to disable comments in their online comment section. Yet not all these vulgar comments were removed, leading *Huffington Post* contributor Lisa Clarke to connect 'Page 3 images with sexual assault, domestic violence and rape' (Clarke 2013). Another development saw *No More Page 3* join forces with *Child's Eyes* to urge retail supermarkets not to prominently display magazines and newspapers that featured sexual images. Retail giant *Tesco* responded by redesigning their magazine layout in November

⁵⁷ Levine goes even further in their analysis of Medusa's beheading. According to Levine, the removal of Medusa's head signifies a patriarchal marriage ideal, where the voiceless fertile body is separated from the sexual head (Levine 1995, 93). Therefore, it is only once the head (signifying female sexuality) is removed from Medusa's body that her children, Chrysaor and Pegasus, can be born from her spilled blood (Hesiod, *Theogony* 270-83).

2014. I suggest that this has led Liz Gloyn in her exploration of the monstrous in popular culture to read Rihanna's *GQ* cover as such:

The daring of putting Medusa on the cover, too, generates that frisson of danger, albeit repurposed in a culture where semi-nude photography of women's bodies is not quite as acceptable as it once was – will Medusa turn you to stone for catching her undressed? Medusa threatens both the reader and the magazine itself, threatening both with destruction.
Gloyn 2020, 164.

Therefore, Rihanna's Gorgon continues to conflate female sexuality with danger but in different terms. It is a magazine cover that shows a Medusa who retains a level of agency and autonomy from her male subjugator, while playing with contemporary male fears and excitement over women's bodies and concerns regarding public displays of the naked female body.

Who's Freezing Who?

In relation to playing to male fears of women's bodies, the images inside *GQ* magazine, where Rihanna continues to be shown in a variety of poses as Medusa, do seem to humorously play with Medusa's association with male castration anxiety. One image shows Rihanna as an almost completely nude (save for scallop shell-shaped bikini bottoms) snake-haired, and eyed, Gorgon who holds a snake as if it were her penis (*GQ* December 2013, 338-339). This suggests a tongue-in-cheek nod to Freud's reading of Medusa, the Gorgon whose snakes act as a fetish and a substitute for the penis (as discussed in the Introduction). Further, Medusa, as the fetishized woman, has a gaze that can turn a man stiff, a euphemism for an erection. This suggests a reading of Rihanna as a fetish par-excellence. However, another image within the magazine shows Rihanna, now without her snake hair but wearing cropped Black hair, suggestively licking a snake, her mouth wide open with fanged teeth exposed (*GQ* December 2013, 332). By reading the snake as a phallus poised near the mouth, this again evokes castration anxiety but in different terms. This is more suggestive of Barbara Creed's (1993) reading of Medusa as the vagina dentata: the vagina with teeth. This will be discussed at length in chapter four, but in brief, Creed viewed Medusa as an agent who *castrates* rather than simply *represents* the threat of castration. Thus, the images inside the magazine seem to play to the psychoanalytic readings of Medusa as the female genitals that threaten to castrate the penis, symbolised here by the snake. Using Creed's theory, this would add to a reading of Rihanna's Medusa as a monster with agency, with the pop star evoking the allure and danger of the female body.

The concept of Medusa turning men stiff as a play on her petrifying gaze is interesting, as it is not only Rihanna who can have this effect on men, but it is Hirst who has made Rihanna motionless. In the interview with Heaf, Hirst added that he put Rihanna in ‘formaldehyde because if I don’t, then everyone is going to come up to me and say, “So, why didn’t you put her in formaldehyde?” So I will, just to shut them up’ (qtd. in Heaf 2013, 345).⁵⁸ This is in reference to Hirst’s infamous artworks where he preserves various animals in the solution. In his piece *Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything* (1996), for example, Hirst cut up two cows into twelve parts, each part in its own tank of a formaldehyde solution. In an interview with art critic Stuart Morgan, Morgan asks what the ‘inherent lie’ is, to which Hirst replies, ‘That you have to kill things in order to look at them’ (Hirst to Morgan 1996). Of course, Hirst has not literally put Rihanna in the chemical solution but is it this ‘lie’ that Hirst plays on by making Rihanna a Gorgon that has been killed again and again in retellings of the myth, so much so that she, ironically, never dies?⁵⁹ Even after her beheading, ancient myths tell of the ways the Gorgon retains her power where it is found on Athena’s aegis. Without the literal use of formaldehyde, Hirst has ‘preserved’ Rihanna, for he has connected her with the image of the Gorgon that refuses to die in popular culture as her image is recreated again and again.⁶⁰ As a pop star who relies on the perpetuation of her image, this can only be a good thing.

Other Reference to Mythology

There are also other ancient mythological references made in the images of Rihanna in *GQ* that go beyond Medusa: Venus and Isis. Venus is suggested by the bikini bottoms that Rihanna wears which are in the shape of a scallop shell (mentioned briefly above), and thus evoke Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* (as well as Lady Gaga’s use of the same symbol to promote her new album *Artpop* [2013] prior to its release [Kruvant 2013]). Rihanna is thus connected with Botticelli’s Venus rather than the negative racial use of ‘Venus’ to refer to Sara Baartman, also known as the ‘Hottentot Venus’, a South African (Khoisan) Black woman who was paraded and displayed to British and French audiences in the early

⁵⁸ Among the numerous photos of Rihanna as Medusa in *GQ*, Hirst photoshops her into one of his infamous tanks filled with formaldehyde (*GQ* December 2013, 347).

⁵⁹As this is a chapter that pays particular focus on Black women’s hair, it is noteworthy that formaldehyde, a known carcinogen, was an ingredient added to Brazilian keratin treatment (BKT), after a ‘Brazilian mortician...realized that formaldehyde was straightening the hair of his corpses’ (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 226). Marketed towards Black hair, it shows the lengths Black women will go to achieve straight hair.

⁶⁰ In fact, in 2013 artist Jim Starr accused Hirst of plagiarising his work, as Starr had previously created prints of ‘an absolutely drop dead gorgeous and sexy version of the mythical creature’ (‘Screen Print Jim’ n/d). Yet, images of beautiful Medusa’s have been reproduced for centuries.

nineteenth century. Baartman's large bottom (steatopygia) and genitalia attracted both white male and female attention, and she was viewed as a sexual Other.⁶¹ After Baartman died, Napoleon's surgeon dissected and preserved her brain and genitals in formaldehyde, and these were then displayed in the Paris museum Musée de L'Homme until 1976. It was not until 2002 that the French senate decided to return her body to South Africa. During the debate with the French senate, Nicolas About, who sponsored the bill, said the following: 'This young woman was treated as if she was something monstrous. But where in this affair is the true monstrosity?' (qtd. in Daley 2002). Unlike Baartman, Rihanna is not being exploited by white men and presented as an exotic Other. Rather, Rihanna in these images has autonomy and proudly displays her sexuality and Black femininity as the monstrous Gorgon while also aligning herself with the goddess Venus in a positive way. As discussed above, Rihanna is not simply a fetish object to be gawped at; there is a 'danger' to these images where she plays to male fears and desires, while also offering, I argue, a racial reading that is subversive and empowering. I will return to the ancient mythical use of 'Venus' and Baartman in the subsequent chapter.

Isis, unlike Venus, is a more permanent marker on Rihanna's body as a tattoo that sprawls across her sternum. Rihanna had the tattoo inked in 2012 in memory of her grandmother, on which the pop star said the following: 'Goddess Isis- Complete Woman – Model for future generations- #GRANGRANDOLLY – always in and on my heart #1love' (badgalriri September 2012).⁶² As *Antiquipop* blogger Fabien Bièvre-Perrin notes, in the same year of 2012, Rihanna had *three* tattoos inked that all related to ancient Egypt (Bièvre-Perrin 2017). Although these other two are not in view in the *GQ* shots, they include the falcon representing Horus on her ankle, with wings outstretched so that it resembles a handgun (a pose found in ancient Egyptian iconography, for example an inlay depicting a falcon with spread wings, fourth century BCE, Egypt, can be found at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), and the Egyptian queen Nefertiti on her ribcage (Bièvre-Perrin 2017).⁶³ As Bièvre-Perrin notes, 2012 was also the year Rihanna released the single 'Where

⁶¹Black women are often considered or assumed to have larger posteriors than other ethnic groups, and this has continuously been fetishized in Western culture. It is encapsulated in Jean-Paul Goude's piece 'Carolina Beaumont' otherwise known as the 'Champagne Incident' (1976), where Goude's then girlfriend, Carolina Beaumont, a Black woman, balances a champagne glass on her bottom with champagne pouring into it. This image was problematically recreated by reality TV star Kim Kardashian for *Paper* magazine in 2014. It caused controversy as many accused Kardashian, a white woman, of profiting off her large posterior, whereas Black women are often mocked for their deemed larger bottoms.

⁶² The exact formatting is reproduced here.

⁶³ The accession number for the inlay at The Met Museum is 26.7.991.

Have You Been’, with the accompanying music video being Egyptian inspired (Bièvre-Perrin 2017).⁶⁴ In the video, Rihanna performs a dance routine in a desert, and in the background are pyramids in the style of the Pyramid of Djoser, also known as the step pyramid, in Egypt. During her performance of the song on *American Idol*, season eleven (2012), Rihanna continued the Egyptian theme, stepping out from a glass pyramid while an Egyptian pyramid is projected behind her on a screen. Significantly, Rihanna wore her hair in locks for this performance.

Locked African hair has deep cultural significance. The name ‘dreadlocs’ (or dreadlocks) comes from white enslavers who viewed matted African hair (locs or locks) as ‘dreadful’, therefore as Byrd and Tharps add: ‘For that reason, many today wearing the style choose to drop the *a* in *dreadloc* to remove all negative connotations’ (2014, 121). Therefore, while locked hair is evident in many different cultures, locked African hair has a unique history. Although locks were thought to have been worn by ancient Egyptians, Rihanna’s performance connects ancient Egypt and Black Africa with an African Caribbean pop star. The race of ancient Egyptians is a topic fraught with controversy. However, by touching on this issue, ancient Egypt’s significance for Black people can be explored and may explain why it holds such meaning to Rihanna.

The ancient world has often been appropriated and manipulated to disparage Black people and justify white supremacy. Yet, to consider ancient Egypt or even Greece and Rome in exclusively ‘Black’ or ‘white’ terms is erroneous. Racism in the modern sense was unlikely to have existed in the Greek and Roman world (though there is evidence for prejudice based on ethnicity which Benjamin Isaac [2006] refers to as ‘proto-racism’). The ancient Greek and Roman worlds were much more diverse than some would like to believe, yet America as the ‘new Republic’ modelled itself on classical antiquity, which was interpreted as the ‘political and cultural origin or ‘past’ of the United States’ and ‘racially white’ (Malamud 2016, 4). Pro-slavery groups in particular used the classical world as evidence of white superiority and Black inferiority. For example, some anti-abolitionists proposed that Black people were inferior because they were incapable of learning ancient Greek or Latin. As David Withun says in article published online by the *African American Intellectual History Society (AAIHS)*:

⁶⁴ There are also other notable influences in the video, such as Rihanna being the Hindu god Shiva with his many arms, another performance in what appears to be an African hut, and at the very beginning of the video there is the suggestion that Rihanna is half-amphibian.

...John C. Calhoun, a former vice president and, later, senator from South Carolina, claimed in the first half of the nineteenth century that he would not 'believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man' until he 'could find a Negro who knew the Greek syntax'.
Withun (2017).⁶⁵

However, in the late eighteenth century a new argument emerged that would have profound implications for many African Americans: that the ancient Egyptians had been racially Black. This was suggested by the French enlightenment traveller, Constantin Francois de Chasseboeuf, comte de Volney, also known as Count Volney (1757-1820). Volney travelled and wrote about Egypt, and he closely used the Greek historian Herodotus (born c. 484BCE - 425/413 BCE) as a source. One particular passage written by Herodotus caught Volney's attention: 'that the Colchians are of Egyptian descent.... based first on the fact that they have Black skins and woolly hair' (Herodotus, *The Histories* 2.104). Volney took this passage as evidence that the ancient Egyptians were Black, and thus argued that the current slavery of Black people was 'barbarous' as the Western world owed its 'arts, sciences, and even the very use of speech' to an Egypt that was once populated by, what he argued was, a majority Black race (1788, 81 and 83).

African Americans in the early nineteenth century, inspired by the works of writers such as Volney, began to take interest in the classical world to refute arguments constructed to support white male hegemony, and to insert themselves into a history from which they had previously been barred. For example, in 1831 the African American Reverend Owen T.B. Nickens said in his speech celebrating the anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery in New York held in Cincinnati: 'in Egypt there stand, reared by the hands of our fathers, the magnificent pyramids' and 'the land of your fathers is the birth-place and cradle of the arts and sciences' (Malamud 2016, 147). Therefore, from the 1800s many African Americans argued that their ancestors were Egyptian, and that Egypt was the centre of civilization which had educated the Greeks who in turn 'civilized the Romans, and Greco-Roman culture had civilized the world' (Malamud 2016, 9).

Ancient Egypt would have been a mixed population but, at the *very least*, there is strong evidence that Black people were a part of that demographic. However, ancient Egyptians continue to be presented in popular culture as white, brown, but rarely ever *Black*. One of the most recent examples in film is Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014),

⁶⁵ I shall explore other ways the ancient world was appropriated to promote certain racial ideologies in the subsequent chapter.

where white actors Christian Bale and Joel Edgerton played Moses and Ramesses II, respectively. Of most concern in this film is that, while the main characters are largely white, the roles of slaves and villains are played by mainly Black actors (clearly influenced by modern definitions of slavery based on race) (Akala 2015). Many Black people continue to look to ancient Egypt to challenge the ‘whitewashing’ of history, but also view it as a part of African history from which they have been displaced. After all, Black history prior to the trans-Atlantic slave trade is often neglected. This is arguably why ancient Egypt, an epicentre of early knowledge and civilization, holds such significance to Rihanna and other Black artists, and is a topic I will return to in the subsequent chapter.⁶⁶ That Rihanna has Egyptian iconography as permanent markers on her body and that she connects Isis with her grandmother shows this need to connect to the past and the inheritance of identity through the matriarchal line. It may also explain why Rihanna would have so willingly played Medusa. As will be discussed below, Black women have reclaimed Medusa as an African Black woman who was viewed by a white Greek man as a monster because of her hair, but also because many ancient authors give Medusa an African origin (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 3.52-55; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.615-20; Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 2.21.5. Further, she is not always described as physically monstrous or sub-human, as Diodorus and Pausanias describe her as an African queen).⁶⁷ Whether Medusa was based on a ‘Black’ woman is unknown; again, race in the modern sense does not compare with the way race was viewed in the ancient world). What is significant is that Medusa is viewed by modern Black women as an African figure that has essentially been stolen and created into a monster by white people. By becoming Medusa, Rihanna follows a long line of Black women who have reclaimed the Gorgon as a powerful Black woman, and in doing so challenges the ways the classical world has been appropriated to promote certain racial ideologies.

Therefore, the significance of the ancient world for Rihanna becomes clearer, and her initial use of ancient Egyptian mythology may have inspired Hirst’s idea to photograph the star as Medusa. Further, it must certainly have influenced his decision to portray her as an

⁶⁶ Martin Bernal’s controversial *Black Athena* (1987) is a key example, and so is ‘Afrofuturism’, discussed in more detail in the subsequent chapter.

Examples of other Black artists using ancient Egypt in their performances include Nicki Minaj, who was born in Trinidad and Tobago, and like Rihanna is African Caribbean. She became the Macedonian queen, Cleopatra VII, on the album cover for *Queen* (2018), a figure who is often misread as Egyptian. The connection with Egypt continues with Beyoncé, an African American woman, who emerged onstage at Coachella as Nefertiti, in 2018.

⁶⁷ See Introduction for a brief mention of these authors versions. Note that Susan Bowers argues that the pre-Olympian Medusa was the ‘serpent-goddess of the Libyan Amazons’ as well as the ‘Destroyer component of the Triple Goddess’ alongside ‘Neith of Egypt and Athene in North Africa’ (1990, 220).

Egyptian queen in his later work *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* (2017). In fact, during the interview with Heaf, Hirst said on his *GQ* cover shoot:

But I'm working on a new collection, a series called Treasures. There are some paintings of Medusa, some sculptures. The idea has an arc. I've been working on it for about four years and it probably won't be finished for another four.
Hirst to Heaf (2013).

Hirst suggests continuity between the two projects, and the idea of Rihanna inspiring Hirst's use of her image in conjunction with the ancient world certainly adds to this notion of the *GQ* shoot being collaborative, while also showing why Rihanna would have so willingly obliged to become this mythical figure. If the *GQ* project and *Treasures* form an arc, the two must be explored.

Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable

It was 2017 when Hirst's ambitious ten-year art project *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* was finally released. The exhibition was showcased at Punta della Dogana and Palazzo Grassi, Venice from the ninth of April to the third of December 2017. Also released was an accompanying mockumentary (of the same name) directed by Sam Hobkinson. The premise was the discovery of a sunken ship in 2008 off the east coast of Africa that contained treasures from the ancient world. The ship was owned by a freed slave called Cif Amotan II, an anagram of 'I am a fiction', originally from Antioch and who lived during the 'mid-first and early-second centuries CE' (Donoghue 2017). Amotan had become very wealthy by collecting various artistic 'treasures' and was in the middle of transporting them on the ship (called *Apistos* 'meaning "Unbelievable" in Koine Greek') when the ship sank (Donoghue 2017). The 'treasures' that were 'found' were the ones displayed in the exhibition, with Hirst taking the role of patron rather than their creator.

The mockumentary used actors as 'real life' experts to enhance the impression of a real significant archaeological finding, for example, 'Andrew Lerner' is presented as a professor of Maritime Studies at the University of Aberdeen but is a fictional character (Halperin 2018). The findings were largely statues of various ancient mythological figures, and Medusa was a particularly prominent figure, with her head featuring three times in the display. The heads are based on Caravaggio's *Medusa*, with the Gorgon shown in an open mouthed, silent scream pose, though with a pleasant feminine face. The decapitated head is replicated in three different materials: malachite, gold, and crystal. The heads differ very

slightly, with the crystal version bearing fangs that are not present in the others. Many of the figures throughout the exhibition blend the real with the fictitious by including ancient archaeological ‘finds’ with popular culture. For example, a model of Andromeda tied to rocks called, ‘Andromeda and the Sea Monster’, shows the princess under threat by a monster that is a shark, in a nod towards *Jaws* (1975) as well as Hirst’s infamous piece called *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) where Hirst preserved and displayed a tiger shark in formaldehyde. There was also a ‘Grecian Nude series’, modelled on the figures of Barbie dolls and with ‘© 1999 Mattel Inc. CHINA’ markings (Da Silva 2017). Indeed, the exhibition and mockumentary seemed to poke fun at those who believed that the findings were real, as well as raising questions regarding the ways myth and popular culture are used in society.

Another way in which Hirst conflated fiction with the real was by imposing modern celebrity faces onto statues of figures from history. One of these is a piece called ‘Aten’, which shows Rihanna as a brown bust with her nipple piercing and Isis tattoo displayed. The bust is covered in various seashells, which adds to the impression that this piece has been laying at the bottom of the sea for just under two thousand years. Aten is the ancient Egyptian sun god who became the sole deity of Egyptian religion when Akhenaten, husband of Nefertiti, changed the religious landscape during his rule c. 1350-1334 BCE (the Amarna period) by creating a monotheistic religion. This led the Egyptian queen to change her name to Neferneferuaten-Nefertiti: ‘Exquisite Beauty of the Aten. A Beautiful Woman Has Come’ (Tyldesley 2018, 9). So entwined was Nefertiti with Aten that there is evidence that she may have been worshipped as a goddess (see Tyldesley 2005). Hirst’s piece, considering the connection between Nefertiti and the sun god, suggests that this is actually Rihanna as *Nefertiti*. The headdress that adorns Rihanna in the sculpture is similar to Nefertiti’s that has become synonymous with the Egyptian queen and is found on the *Bust of Queen Nefertiti*, c. 1340 BCE, now located at the Neues Museum, Berlin. Thus, Rihanna is a Black Nefertiti, two beautiful women thousands of years apart becoming one. The same year as Hirst’s exhibition, Rihanna featured on the front cover of *Vogue Arabia* as Nefertiti and wore a replica of the Egyptian queen’s distinguished blue headdress (November 2017 issue). An image taken from inside the magazine shows Rihanna posing next to the sculpture Hirst created of her as Nefertiti for the Venice Biennale exhibition; thus, the sculpture serves as her reflection. The cover faced backlash, however, for not featuring an Egyptian woman, or

woman of Arabian descent, on the cover and there were claims that it further ‘perpetuated the notion that Black and African people are interchangeable’ (Pham 2017).

Yet, while the *Bust of Queen Nefertiti* is unique in that it still shows its original colouring, Egyptian artists typically painted men with ‘red-brown skin while their female relations would be given a yellow-white skin’ (Tyldesley 2018, 109), there is no way to know Nefertiti’s exact skin-colouring (again, it must be stressed that the colour of one’s skin was not a pressing concern for the ancient Egyptians). However, Nefertiti, an ancient figure of feminine beauty, has been aligned with, and been used to highlight, the beauty of white women. As Egyptologist Joyce Tyldesley states: ‘in fashion-oriented journals...throughout the 1920s and 1930s, posted regular features comparing conventional Western beauties (none of whom were dark-skinned, bald or lacking an eye) to the bust’ (2018, 109).⁶⁸ Even Hitler was said to have favoured the statue (Tyldesley 2018, 141-142). Therefore, when Rihanna became Nefertiti, she challenged the ways in which this Egyptian queen had been so associated with European notions of beauty and whiteness. Further, Rihanna can be viewed as part of a long line of African American and African Caribbean women who continue to align themselves with ancient Egypt to challenge how the ancient world has been used, and to connect with some form of African history that is not reduced to slavery.

Applying this to Rihanna’s Medusa, I contend that the pop star challenges most depictions of the Gorgon in popular culture as a white woman, and sparks conversations regarding whitewashing (the subject of the subsequent chapter). As discussed, Medusa was given an African origin in the ancient sources and is read as a Black woman with locked hair by modern Black women (below). Therefore, through her alignment with the ancient Egyptian and Greek worlds, Rihanna is ‘controlling her image’ and ‘tapping into a discourse of authority from which people of colour have historically been deliberately excluded’ (Gloyn 2020, 165). Hirst’s images and sculptures are a culmination of Rihanna’s initial use of ancient mythology and connects Medusa with Africa by presenting her as a Black woman on the *GQ* magazine cover but also the findings of her head(s) off the coast of Africa in *Treasures*. Yet, in his work, we are accompanied by Hirst’s voice throughout. In the pages of *GQ* magazine, we hear Hirst’s voice, not Rihanna’s. I argue that by considering both Rihanna’s existing engagement with mythology *and* the reappropriation of Medusa by Black women, Rihanna is speaking via her image as a Medusa. I shall suggest that she is also

⁶⁸ Nefertiti’s bust is missing its left eye, while it is likely that the queen would have had a shaved head.

directing her 'voice' towards a specific audience, the Black female spectator who, through specific cultural knowledge, can read Rihanna's Medusa as empowering.

African Hair

Regardless of whether Medusa was based on a Black woman in the ancient world, she has been read as such by many Black women who have reclaimed her primarily because of her *hair*. Before I explore the reappropriation of Medusa by Black women as a symbol of Black female identity, I shall first briefly discuss the political nature of Black women's hair.

Hair is an important symbol of identity across all cultures; however, few have the complex history that African hair has in the Western world. Black women living in Western societies (but not limited to) are subject to specific and continuing racial and gendered pressures regarding hair that leads Black women to use various 'beauty' methods to disguise their hair's natural texture. I would further like to highlight here that I am not suggesting that all Black women living in Western countries change their hair style and texture simply as a mode of assimilation. Being creative with hair by wearing weaves, wigs and extensions can be empowering for women. However, the overwhelming issue is that many Black women do so as they feel they have no choice. This is especially because, when Black women do wear their hair naturally, they often receive some form of criticism.

African hair as it has been received by white people has a long history. When American and European settlers colonised, abducted and abused Black people as part of the slave trade, African hair evoked a curiosity due to its unfamiliarity. African hair has since been, and continues to be, a source of fascination for white people who have, through various ways, sought to alienate Black people because of this difference in hair texture and sought to regulate African hair in a system of oppression and control. There are various examples that could be included here, ranging from the origin of the term 'dreadlocks' (discussed above), the Tignon Laws (1786) and, in the more modern day, how workplaces and schools tend to view Black hairstyle as fashion rather than in light of its historical and cultural significance, and where magazines perpetuate beauty ideals as synonymous with straight and smooth textured European hair.⁶⁹ Locked hair is particularly the subject of scrutiny. For example, in

⁶⁹ The Tignon Laws followed the Spanish colonial governor Esteban Miro's edict that focused on the behaviour and appearance of Black women in New Orleans. Black women were ordered to cover their hair with a tignon to prevent them from adorning their hair with feather and beads, as they did at the time. It was implemented to control and show the lower status of Black women. Many Black women responded by wearing the tignon with their own custom designs such as using different knots or jewels (Ze Winters 2016, 78). Black female hair was also controlled by the wives of slavers who would often cut off the hair of their Black slave girls (Bailey and Da

2016 the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals declared banning dreadlocks in the workplace legal (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission versus Catastrophe Management Solutions, [2016]). The case began when a Black woman called Chastity Jones had her offer of employment from Catastrophe Management Solutions revoked because she refused to change her dreadlocked hair. On the fifteenth of September 2016 the court ruled against Jones' favour. This was in accord with Title VII which prohibits discrimination based on racial characteristics which are 'immutable', such as hair texture; however, as dreadlocks are a hairstyle and can be changed, Jones' employers were within their full rights to revoke their offer of employment based on her hairstyle (Finley 2016).⁷⁰

Black hair is political and dreadlocks, in particular, have a history of being both political and revolutionary for Black people. Rastafarians, for example, view the hair as 'an indisputable racial characteristic' after adopting the style from the Mau Mau (The Kikuyu of Kenya) who wore the style when fighting British colonisers during the 1950s (Nicholas quoted in Byrd and Tharps 2014, 121). The historical nature of dreadlocks gives this hairstyle a profound meaning for the Black people who choose to wear them and can draw resentment from Black people towards white people who simply wear them as a fashion statement. Jamia Wilson, a Black female writer who wears her hair in dreadlocks, discusses the difference between Black and white people wearing this hair style. For her, 'locking' one's hair is 'going back to the natural progression of what my hair was like on its own' and that white people taking, 'extra steps to push their hair in that direction is an interesting thing to look at as a different sort of metaphor as opposed to this is what your hair would do naturally' (Grinberg 2016). Thus, because of the texture of African hair, Black people do not have to resort to methods to lock their hair but 'simply by washing the hair and letting it be' can achieve this look (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 121). Dreadlocks are thus a way of caring for African hair, yet the stigma surrounding locks directly discriminates against Black people.

This is by no means an extensive consideration of how Black hair is treated in society. It continues to be the subject of many songs (for example Solange's 'Don't Touch my Hair'

Costa 2014, 6). This was in response to Black hair evoking fascination or sexual allure in their white husbands (Bailey and Da Costa 2014, 6). Thus, to rid Black girls of their sexuality, their hair would be removed.

⁷⁰ The Judge added that:

There have been some calls for courts to interpret Title VII more expansively by eliminating the biological conception of 'race' and encompassing cultural characteristics associated with race... As far as we can tell, every court to have considered the issue has rejected the argument that Title VII protects hairstyles culturally associated with race.
Finley (2016)

2016), documentary films (for example Chris Rock's *Good Hair* 2009), films (*Nappily Ever After* 2018), TV shows (for example, *Self Made* 2020), and news (for example, actress Lupita Nyong'o in 2017 criticised UK fashion magazine *Grazia* for photoshopping her natural hair).⁷¹ Black hair has repeatedly been viewed by white society *negatively*, or appropriated and used as a fashion statement, and even as 'exotic' where Black women particularly report white people fascinated with their hair and trying to touch it without permission. These views towards African hair have been absorbed by Black communities who often view their hair in 'good' or 'bad' terms. The latter is colloquially referred to as 'nappy' hair, which is hair that has a kinky texture and is not smooth, in other words, it is untreated African hair. Black communities thus have to navigate their own perception of their image with the way they are viewed by white society and the scrutinizing gaze. Therefore, Black hair carries deep cultural meanings that are not always picked up by others. As a demarcation of their 'difference' many Black women are rejecting societal pressures, wearing their natural unprocessed hair as a symbol of their Black identity and pride in their culture. It is for this reason that many Black women resonate with, and reclaim, Medusa.

The Black Medusa: The Poetry of Colleen McElroy and Dorothea Smartt

Medusa's snake hair, although evoking locked hair via the snakes, has come to represent all forms of natural Black hair that includes afros. This is evident in the poem 'A Navy Blue Afro' (1976) by the African American poet Colleen J. McElroy, published in her book *Music from Home* (1976). The 1970s followed the Black Power movement of the 1960s and a period when the afro became symbolic of a collective aesthetic racial movement that focused on natural Black hair.⁷² However, in the 1970s the afro was becoming more associated with

⁷¹ The full *Instagram* post that Nyong'o released alongside the original and photoshopped image reads as follows:

As I have made clear so often in the past with every fiber of my being, I embrace my natural heritage and despite having grown up thinking light skin and straight, silky hair were the standards of beauty, I now know that my dark skin and kinky, coily hair are beautiful too. Being featured on the cover of a magazine fulfills me as it is an opportunity to show other dark, kinky-haired people, and particularly our children, that they are beautiful just the way they are. I am disappointed that @graziauk invited me to be on their cover and then edited out and smoothed my hair to fit their notion of what beautiful hair looks like. Had I been consulted, I would have explained that I cannot support or condone the omission of what is my native heritage with the intention that they appreciate that there is still a very long way to go to combat the unconscious prejudice against black women's complexion, hair style and texture.
#dtmh

@lupitanyongo 2017. (The hashtag 'dtmh' an acronym for 'don't touch my hair').

⁷² The afro famously worn by Angela Davis, for example, was viewed by white Americans in the 1970s as an 'unruly natural hairdo' that 'symbolized Black militancy (that is, anti-whiteness)', when Davis was wanted by the FBI in 1971 (Davis 1994, 39).

Around the same time, in 1970, *Essence* magazine was first published and was aimed at an African American female audience. It challenged the number of white faces that graced the covers of women's magazines.

fashion rather than a political affiliation, and Black and white people were paying large sums of money to have the hairstyle (defeating the purpose of natural Black hair) (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 49-67).⁷³

This poem can be read as reflecting this ambivalent period. The poem highlights how some Black women ‘betray’ their Blackness by disguising their natural hair in order to ‘fit in’ with Western society:

 vying for visibility
 for cover stories
you have seen them
all those fake Furies
 coiffured
 powdered
 and costumed
their Medusa hair tamed
Colleen J. McElroy (1976)

The ‘fake Furies’ here are the Black women who are covering their ‘Blackness’, who want to be ‘visible’ to a white society that, especially during the period when the poem was written, almost exclusively featured white women on the front of magazines and as the model of beauty to aspire to. One way to do so was to ‘tame’ their ‘Medusa hair’. Here, Medusa is read as a Black woman whose snakes are the unprocessed hair. There are two uses of ancient Greek mythology here. The furies in the ancient world were the three goddesses of vengeance, whereas Medusa is, of course, a monster. Here, McElroy reclaims Medusa from her monstrosity as a symbol of Black female authenticity; whereas the furies are viewed negatively, Medusa is not:

 sometimes I can almost see
the girl with the navy blue hair
 among them
 until she turns
and her Blackness sings to me
like a Jacob Lawrence painting.
Colleen J. McElroy (1976)

The girl with the navy-blue hair, in considering the poem’s title, has an afro. She is the woman who takes pride in her Blackness, she is Medusa or a daughter of Medusa. Thus, the Gorgon comes to represent Black hair in all its unprocessed forms. Also note that the reference to Jacob Lawrence, an African American painter, in the final line is striking as his

⁷³ It also became a caricature in Blaxploitation films (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 64).

work reflected African migration and African American life and took particular inspiration from the Harlem Renaissance (c. early 1920s to the mid-1930s), a time when African culture thrived in this part of New York.

Medusa's connection with African hair in poetry continues in performance artist and poet Dorothea Smartt's one-woman performance piece titled *Medusa* (1993, ICA London).⁷⁴ Smartt, who is of Barbadian heritage, was born (b.1963) and raised in Brixton, London. As a young Black girl, she has described the name-calling by children in her neighbourhood who would derogatively refer to her as 'Medusa' because of her African hair. This is not unique to Smartt. Comments left under an image of a Black Medusa on *Instagram* (posted by user *chakabars* [@chakabars] on the fourth of July 2020) reveals how many Black women (and men) have been called 'Medusa' since an early age by non-Black children. For example, the caption to the image read 'When I was a child we moved into a white area, me my brother and sister got call (sic) Medusa and were bullied so our mum cut our locks off because we began to hate our hair and ourselves' (@chakabars 2020). By calling the performance *Medusa*, Dorothea reclaims this derogative slur, taking a name imposed on her and *owning* it. During the show, Smartt becomes Medusa, 'in part by using her own hair to represent Medusa's dreaded locks, and in part by creating a Medusa mask for the performance installation's central image' (Goodman 1996, 198). This quote has been taken from Lizbeth Goodman's 'Who's Looking at Who(m): Re-viewing Medusa' (1996) where Goodman discusses Smartt's show and includes extracts from an interview that she had conducted with the artist the previous year (1995). The use of the mask in Smartt's piece has interesting implications for an exploration of the gaze, an important theme within the performance. As Goodman states in relation to Smartt's initial reclamation of Medusa: 'Smartt not only looked at the children but looked at herself through their eyes, and took that title back as a comic claim of the mythic status, and also a powerful way to connect with a powerful figure' (Goodman 1996, 197). Thus, the mask allows Smartt to make a commentary on how she is viewed through the gaze of the Other as Medusa, a monster, yet: 'the wearer of the mask can reverse perspectives, can see what those who watched saw in her while they can see her

⁷⁴ The 90s were also a pivotal time for Black hair. During the 80s and 90s there was a reversal back to wanting straight hair that had not gone away during the Black Pride movement but had simply lain 'dormant' (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 119). Further, as music videos were becoming more popular, Black audiences were bombarded with images of Black women in these videos with lighter skin and 'movable hair' thus: 'Beauty ideals remained firmly entrenched in a Eurocentric image of long, "swinging" hair' (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 119). Yet, in 1990, the US magazine *Essence* 'urged its readers to embrace their African heritage', clearly marking the complex issues (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 90).

looking back at them' (Goodman 1996, 200). It also becomes a form of daily performance, for 'the mask represents being someone you're not – sometimes for protection, sometimes out of fear of sanction, because it may feel safer to pretend to be something "safer"' (Smartt 1995, in Goodman 1996, 198).

Viewing herself through the eyes of others as a Medusa led Smartt to turn to Medusa's mythology where she found that the Gorgon was 'a Libyan princess, a Black woman, an outcast' (Smartt qtd. in Goodman 1996, 198). Smartt came to the following conclusion:

I thought to myself: Medusa was probably some Black woman with nappy hair, and some white man saw her and cried: a monster!, and feared her, and so told stories about her dangerous potential.⁷⁵
Smartt qtd. in Goodman 1996, 200-201.

Smartt also said that she began to study anthropology and 'the first encounters of white men in Africa' and how they may have viewed Black women as 'fantastic creatures' (Smartt qtd. in Goodman 1996, 201). For Smartt, the response to Black women as 'fantastic creatures' stems from racial differences related to hair. It is the reception of Black women as 'Other' and viewing the self through the gaze of others, that led Smartt to feel like an outsider. To add to her sense of alienation, Smartt is both a Black woman and a lesbian.⁷⁶ This sense of not fitting in, compounded by being referred to as a monstrous Gorgon, led Smartt to manipulate her image accordingly: 'she compares her choice to do up her hair in "locs" with the discovery of her sexuality as major points in her life, both about recognition of "not being the same."' (Goodman 1996, 200). Smartt *chooses* to wear her hair in 'locs' almost as an embrace of her 'difference' and connects the hair with Medusa's as a powerful symbol of race and sexuality. As Smartt said: 'I wanted Medusa to say "Black is beautiful", and put to rest the need to wipe out so much of our (physical and spiritual) African self' (Griggs 2005, 185).

Although the full text of Smartt's performance of *Medusa* has not (to my knowledge) been published, in *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival* (2006), Meredith Gadsby mentions and quotes a poem taken from *Medusa* called 'Medusa Settle'. In

⁷⁵ Again, whether Medusa was racially Black is open to interpretation. There have been other feminists that have postulated that the 'Gorgons were a Black Amazon tribe, "whose kinky hair caused the Greeks to mock them as having snakes for hair"', as mentioned by Emily E. Culpepper in 'Ancient Gorgons: A Face for Contemporary Women's Rage' (1986, 239).

⁷⁶ She rejects the term 'lesbian', see Gadsby 2006, 116.

this poem, Smartt implores Black women to look at their Medusa selves and ‘not to be turned to stone!’ but to ‘let our beauty be exposed...the mask shattered’ (quoted in Gadsby 2006, 112-113). This is Smartt clearing through other’s constructions of Black women as monstrous Medusa’s and to look at herself clearly to find the beautiful Black woman. ‘medusa? medusa black!’ is another poem that features in the performance and, in 2001, Smartt released *connecting medium*, a collection of poems where this poem can also be found.⁷⁷ The collection focuses largely on the topic of African hair, but it is toward the end of the collection where several of the poems are firmly situated around Medusa symbolism. These poems are written as they would be spoken by Smartt in Bajan dialect. They encompass the dual notion of absorbing racial slurs as truths and thus an aversion to the Black self and feeling like a monster, a Medusa, to proudly *becoming* Medusa who breaks away from the suffocating gaze of others. This is encapsulated in the first of these Medusa poems, called ‘ten paces’:

I fear
if I could turn men to stone
I’d walk round
beside
in front
but never behind them
Smartt 2001, 56.

Here, Smartt as Medusa embodies the Gorgon’s fear of looking at others, not meeting their eyes for fear of turning them to stone. Yet, others are free to look at her. As the object of their gaze, it can be inferred that Smartt feels like an alien who attracts fascination and whose anger would lead her to turn all men she looked at to stone.⁷⁸

The subsequent poem ‘medusa? medusa black!’ details how, to assimilate and to ‘fit in’, Black women are inflicting violence upon themselves. The poem equates treating Black hair with self-harming in order to ‘banish the snake-woman’: ‘wild-haired woman, straighten it fry it, desperately burn scalps’ (Smartt 2001, 58). This poem alone is so rich in imagery that it is beyond the scope of this chapter to analyse it in full. What is essential to note is the way the poem situates Medusa as a Black woman whose Blackness is undesirable, yet she (the narrator, who I take as Smartt) simultaneously represents a Black woman running away from herself in fear that ‘she see she self like them see she’ (Smartt 2001, 57). Medusa is the

⁷⁷ All poem titles in this collection are lower case.

⁷⁸ This is a different play on Medusa, suggesting she can turn others to stone without her victims looking at her. This is unlike the myth, where it suggests that Gorgon and victim must look at each other.

African woman whom Perseus or white men have viewed as a monster, and she is terrified she will see herself through the eyes of others and come to see a ‘monster’ staring back as her reflection. To be rid of this ‘monster’, to ‘banish the snake-woman’, she attacks her own body and hair. African hair here is described as ‘too tuff too ugly too Black’, it is ‘nappiheaded nastiness’, it is unattractive and to be Black is to be undesirable: ‘Medusa! Black!...Get back’ (Smartt 2001, 58). This last line reflects Big Bill Broonzy’s protest song ‘Black, Brown, and White’ (written in 1939, according to Greene 2018, 138) about a Black man trying to find work in America: ‘They says if you was white, should be all right, If you was brown, stick around, But as you’s black, m-mm brother, git back git back git back’ (‘Black, Brown and White’ 1939).

The next poem ‘medusa: cuts both ways’ contains the theme of inherited trauma via the Gorgon, who unites all Black women in their shared experience. It first appears in the following stanza:

Medusa
 dread anger
 welling up in her stare
 natural roots Blackwoman
 loving Blackwoman
 serious
 Smartt 2001, 59.

Here, ‘dread’ is a lexical ambiguity. It appears to refer to both dread(locks) as well as ‘dread’ meaning fear or trepidation. Medusa in this poem is a Black woman whose hair is symbolic of her anger. This is combined with another lexical ambiguity of ‘roots’ (meaning both hair and place of origin). Thus, Medusa, symbolised by the hair, creates a sense of unity and rage, and this continues elsewhere in the poem where Smartt lists various prominent Black women as Medusa. Among these are Assata Shakur, a member of the Black Liberation Army; Cherry Groce, a Black woman who was unlawfully shot by police in 1985, an event which sparked the Brixton riots; and Audre Lorde, a poet and civil rights activist. After this list, Smartt adds, ‘Medusa is our mother’s mothers’ as well as my favourite line, ‘Medusa in you is you in me is me in you’ (Smartt 2001, 60). Here is the shared identity of Medusa among all Black women that weaves itself through generational suffering of racism and systemic inequality, but also strength and pride in adversity. This is arguably also implied when Rihanna, as Medusa on the front of *GQ*, proudly displays her Isis tattoo in honour of her grandmother.

The poem ends with Smartt describing Medusa as her ‘shield’, a form of protection that empowers her.⁷⁹ Medusa as a protector draws from her role in ancient mythology where she is an apotropaic device that is found, among various places, on Athena’s aegis. Yet Smartt reads Athena’s use of Medusa as ‘the white woman holding the Black woman’s head, a stark visual image capturing the idea of ‘otherness’ punished and of power curtailed by force’ (Goodman 1996, 203). That white women, as well as men, are the oppressor of Black women is an idea that will further be explored in the subsequent chapter. Yet, it also points to how beauty is defined in terms of ‘whiteness’, something that Smartt also shows throughout her work because of the complicated relationship she has with her appearance as a Black woman. Smartt reclaiming Medusa as a shield brings to mind the first-century CE Spanish poet Lucan’s *Pharsalia* (c.61-65 CE). Lucan situates Medusa in West Africa and describes her hair, rather comically, as fashionable:

Time was, they flicked her bare neck
 And tickled Medusa’s
 fancy: like a woman’s coiffeur,
 loose down her back,
 cobras swept up-
 a pompadour – above her brow
 Lucan, *Pharsalia* 9.632-635, trans. by J. W. Joyce (1993).⁸⁰

Later, when Perseus sneaks into her lair, these snakes try to protect Medusa while she sleeps (*Pharsalia*, 9.671-674). This points to how hair operates on different levels and takes on different meanings. Here, Medusa’s hair as fashionable and deadly is a source of pride and protection for the Gorgon, but for Perseus it is simply monstrous. It depends on *who is looking at it* and draws parallels with white people being fascinated by Black women’s hair without understanding its significance.

The use of Medusa and armour continues in the poem in conjunction with African religious tradition:

With Shango double-headed axe
 Yemoja-Ocuti
 My battle dress armour
 Of serious dread.
 Smartt 2001, 61.

⁷⁹ Also drawing comparison with Lady Gaga in chapter four who similarly uses the monstrous as a form of armour.

⁸⁰ What is also interesting is that Lucan describes the hair as the only part of Medusa one could look at without being petrified (*Pharsalia* 9.636-637). It is the part white men can gawp at without fear of being the object of a gaze.

Shango is an African deity venerated by the Yoruba religion, as is Yemoja (for more on the Yoruba religion see Ifa Karade 2020). The Yoruba religion of West Africa will be explored in more depth in the subsequent chapter, but here Medusa is absorbed into an African religious tradition. This is Smartt reclaiming Medusa as African and welcoming her home. The poem ends by again playing on the word ‘dread’. Rather than the colonisers who viewed matted African locks as ‘dreadful’, as discussed above, this is a very real dread or terror that this Black woman inspires because she is an armoured and armed warrior-queen, who invokes Medusa to unleash her anger. By adopting the idea of Medusa as a shield, Smartt’s hair also becomes dangerous and protective. Like Lucan’s description of Medusa, Smartt’s hair waits to bite the hand of anyone who reaches out to touch it.



Fig. 1.2. *The Raft of the Medusa*, Théodore Géricault (1819), Musée du Louvre, Paris.

This urge to reclaim Medusa continues in other poems of the anthology, particularly ‘medusaspeak’ and ‘let her monsters write’. Both call for Medusa’s voice to be heard, be that by sound or words. In ‘medusaspeak’, Smartt takes the perspective of Medusa who is drowning, and she is fighting against the water to scream:

Trying to save the life
that is one’s own,
white foaming at her
mouth, Medusa screams for
you to hear her.
Smartt 2001, 64.

The use of Medusa and the sea seems to play on Théodore Géricault's painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819, see fig. 1.2.). The painting shows the 1816 wreck of the French frigate *Medusa* (*Méduse*). *Medusa* was commanded by Hugues Duroy de Chaumareys a naval officer who had fallen in favour with the newly re-established monarchy. However, he had not been to sea in twenty-five years. Consequently, the ship run aground on its journey to colonise Senegal. There were five safety boats that accommodated those of highest ranks of the four hundred crew, but there were still one hundred and forty-seven members left over and thus the ship's carpenters fashioned a raft made from the wreck of the *Medusa*. Although the raft was far too small, a promise was made that the larger ships would tow those on the raft until all crew members could be saved. However, the ropes were cut and the raft, and those aboard it, was abandoned. For thirteen days, the stranded group suffered horrifying conditions, leaving only fifteen survivors (although, five later died after rescue), who were found by a passing ship called *Argus*.⁸¹ It is a story that fascinated Géricault and his painting depicts the raft on its thirteenth day, with those aboard desperately signalling to the *Argus* in the distance. Among the survivors depicted in the painting are three Black men. The painting is structured into two pyramids, and on the right pyramid, the eye is drawn to the Black man at the top, African crew member Jean Charles, who waves frantically to the distant *Argus*. The tremendous suffering on board the raft, the eye drawn to the Black crew member who takes control of the situation, and the abandonment by the ship's 'elite' points to the horrors of colonialism, and the painting 'remains one of the great witnesses to human indifference to the suffering of others' (Brandt 2007, 133). Taking this to read Smartt's poem, it seems to highlight that Senegal was a French colony and the horrors that colonialism entails. The poem suggests that Medusa wants to speak about the crimes that have been committed here but she has been silenced. Smartt implores the reader to draw on this history, to become Medusa, a monster full of rage:

Let your hair grow long. Rage.
down to skin and bone. Rage.
Smartt 2001, 65.

Medusa becomes a symbol of Black experience and inspires the Black subject to embody her 'monstrousness', her anger, and to let their voice be heard for the silenced. Similarly, the poem 'let her monsters write' advocates for women to allow their 'monstrous' selves to write, to not be contained by words that have been written about women by others. It follows the

⁸¹ A name also taken from Greek mythology, referring to the one hundred-eyed giant.

same lines as Hélène Cixous' 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976, see Introduction), and a return to Cixous is useful here, for her work is influenced by her own colonial background as a young Jewish girl who grew up in the French colony of Algeria.

In 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Cixous includes the following:

...get away with the old Apartheid routine, but for a time only. As soon as they begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is Black: because you are Africa, you are Black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you're afraid. Don't move, you might fall. Most of all, don't go into the forest. And so we have internalised this horror of the dark.

Cixous 1976, 877-878.⁸²

Cixous is stating her claim that women must write for and about themselves, reclaiming themselves from male writing that has constructed them as inexplorable as Africa, a mystery, and that this has been absorbed by women as truth. So much so, that women have been afraid to explore their own bodies. Cixous equates female sexuality with prejudiced white men's first views of Africa. She uses the phrase 'dark continent' (877, 884) which she has plucked from Sigmund Freud's book *The Question of Lay Analysis* (1926). Here he describes female sexuality as follows:

We know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys. But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, the sexual life of adult women is a 'dark continent' for psychology

Freud 1926e, 38.

Note that Freud's use of this phrase is in quotation marks as he borrowed it from explorer Henry M. Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent* (1878), where Stanley describes his expedition of Africa, in areas previously untouched by white men. Therefore, Freud conflates colonial and prejudiced views of Africa, although popular at the time, with patriarchal views regarding the female body. This leads Cixous to the following:

We the precocious, we the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces, the beavies – we are black and we are beautiful.⁸³

Cixous 1976, 878.

⁸² 'Don't go into the forest', evokes fairy tales, especially *Little Red Riding Hood*, and thus points to how fairy tales have been used to control women's behaviour (see chapter four).

⁸³ This last line seems to paraphrase the 'Black is Beautiful' slogan used in the 1960s (discussed below).

In this sense, Cixous' later use of Medusa to exemplify how men have written and constructed women as monstrous, is giving voice to more than one Other. Medusa comes to represent women's bodies but also the colonised. As I have mentioned, this may have been informed by Cixous' own experience of growing up in a French colony.⁸⁴ Cixous' mother was a Jew who had escaped Nazi Germany in 1933 and her father was from Morocco, thus Cixous had a very conflicted view of her identity: 'How could I be from a France that colonized an Algerian country when I knew that we ourselves, German Czechoslovak Hungarian Jews, were other Arabs' (Cixous 1997, 204). Further, when Cixous went to Paris to attend the Lycée Lakanal, a public secondary school: 'That is where I felt the true torments of exile [...] I was deported right inside the class' (Cixous 1997, 204). Cixous' conflicted identity as a woman in a colonised country therefore adds to this reading of her using Medusa and re-writing her myth to advocate giving the oppressed a voice. However, while all women have been taught to be ashamed of their bodies, there must be some recognition of the different ways race plays a role and the layers of prejudice experienced by Black women.

Smartt's use of Medusa is very similar to Cixous' with themes of constructing women as monstrous and women internalising this as truth. Though Cixous touches on the similar treatment of the colonised and women's bodies, Smartt brings the two together by depicting Medusa as a Black woman, read by a white man as a monster. This has been internalised by Black women, but Smartt urges women to reclaim Medusa, the monster, and to utilise the Gorgon's anger to give Black women a voice. Thus, Smartt rearticulates the monstrous as a symbol of Black pride. Further, Smartt's Medusa incorporates another form of the oppressed, the queer woman.

The final poem 'let me land...' is Medusa's return voyage home. It is also Smartt's return to herself, a Black woman who has navigated hurtful perceptions of herself projected onto her by others:

Imagine yourself from outside, uniquely terrible,
softly shimmering, swelling under a seascape,
she Caribbean waters' first light,
dark turquoise broken only by the breeze.
Smartt 2001, 68.

⁸⁴ Those who were born in French ruled Algeria from 1830-1962, like H el ene Cixous, were referred to as 'black feet' ('pied-noir').

No longer dismembered or clouded by the judgement of others, Medusa is ‘re-membered’, as is Smartt, who joins the Gorgon for a serene and beautiful ending:

and these two, Herself & Medusa,
are coming ashore.
Smartt 2001, 69.

Medusa Lives!

Medusa refuses to die in Smartt’s work and by extension popular culture. Her continued resonance for Black women is shown by the artist Diamond Stingily who, three years after Rihanna’s *GQ* shoot, held an exhibition called *Kaas* (2016) at the *Queer Thoughts Gallery* in Tribeca. As the name suggests, the exhibit has a heavy focus on snakes, with the name *Kaa* taken from the character of the snake in Rudyard Kipling’s short story collection *The Jungle Book* (1894) (Kipling had his own views on race and colonialism, as exemplified by his poem *The White Man’s Burden*, 1899). As Stingily explains: ‘In the original book, Kaa is a mentor and friend. He’s the most respected animal in the jungle...Disney made him evil because he’s a snake and that’s more plausible’ (Loiseau 2016). Stingily is therefore interested in the readings of snakes as evil, and thus the following words accompany the exhibition:

‘They taunted me, they called me Medusa,’ said the girl, ‘They told me I looked like the comedic snake, the Disney version. I didn’t know he was powerful, majestic, to be respected. And like him I learned who I was and now I know who I am’.
Stingily, *Kaas* (2016).⁸⁵

Throughout the exhibition, there are hair braids, typical of African hairstyles, of varying lengths pinned to walls. For Stingily, snakes are connected to African hair and, speaking to Benoît Loiseau for *Vice*, she says: ‘I’ve felt like a Gorgon in my life...If you’re a 6.2ft Black woman, people have these assumptions about you. If you can’t speak for yourself, your character will be changed’ (Loiseau 2016). Yet, the exhibition focuses on Black women’s acceptance of themselves and their hair: ‘if your hair isn’t to European standards, you get called names...Black women are tired of relaxing their hair, it’s about accepting who you are’ (Loiseau 2016).

Using Stingily, it is clear that Medusa has consistently been used as a derogative slur towards Black women. The reclamation of Medusa by Black women because of the hair also seems deeply entrenched, and I also include an example here of a Black woman, named

⁸⁵ How Disney holds monopoly over the modern reception of fairy tales, how they have manipulated them, and the effects this has on Black women, is the subject of the next chapter.

Angela, visiting Brooklyn Museum to see artist Kehinde Wiley's exhibition called *A New Republic* (twentieth of February - twenty-fourth of May 2015). A sculpture that was part of the exhibit called *Bound* showed three Black women whose hair was entwined together. Wiley acknowledged that the sculpture's hair is significant as 'Black American women adorn themselves as both a type of communication act and of armor. And hair is principle within that' (note the hair as armour in connection with Smartt above) (McKenzie 2015). However, to my knowledge, Wiley does not mention Medusa in reference to the work. Yet, Angela, on her review on the site *Yelp*, interpreted the sculpture as 'Medusa and her sisters' (M 2015).

African hair has become almost synonymous with Medusa, for good and for bad. This leads me to suggest that Rihanna, as a politically aware pop star, must surely have understood that a Black woman portraying Medusa on the front cover of a magazine was significant. I argue that the image of Rihanna takes on a new meaning that may not have been realised by Hirst. Hirst read Rihanna as Medusa because she is 'badass' and any sexual image of Rihanna on the front cover of a men's magazine is going to entice men to buy, and as a Medusa this simply gives an added sense of danger. However, I suggest that Rihanna would have been motivated to become Medusa because of the Gorgon's significance for Black women and because of her own interest in mythology and history that is connected to Africa. Thus, Rihanna's Medusa, I argue, offers a specific reading for Black female spectators. This Medusa offers a reading of a highly successful Black pop star who is a highly desired woman, wearing 'natural' hair on the front cover of a magazine. Rihanna thus reclaims Medusa from the derogative slur aimed at Black women and turns it into a powerful connotation.

This connection may not have been made, however, by Hirst who, as a white man, may have been unaware of the importance a Black Medusa holds. This became similarly apparent when I spoke to the creative director, David Abbott, of a 2017 car advert that cast a Black actress in the role of Medusa.⁸⁶ The advert was for the Mitsubishi Outlander called 'The Leader'. The car is a hybrid, and thus the advert showed various mythical hybrids (including Pegasus, Centaurs, the Minotaur, a Mermaid, and Medusa – thus drawing mainly from Greek myth) bowing down to the car with the slogan, 'In a world of hybrids, some follow, others lead' ('The Leader' 2017). When I asked Abbott whether it was a conscious decision to use a Black woman to play the role of Medusa, he replied:

⁸⁶ The advert was created by production company *Golley Slater* based in Cardiff, Wales.

we...saw many woman (sic) in casting, of all different ethnic backgrounds and she was chosen because she had the most powerful performance and a very striking look. So, I guess the answer is we didn't set out specifically to use a woman of a particular ethnicity.

Personal conversation with David Abbott, twenty-second of May 2017.

This suggests that when (white) men cast the role of Medusa, there is a different process of thinking, where certain cultural codes specific to Black women are not read or realised. Therefore, Rihanna's Medusa can take on a range of meanings dependent on *who* is looking. While men may be seduced by the sexualised Medusa staring at them from the magazine shelf, Black women may read beyond that and see the photograph of a figure that reflects Black pride and empowerment.

In relation to photography and its significance for many Black people, Black author and activist bell hooks is helpful for expanding on why Rihanna's image as Medusa is subversive, even if it was directed and photographed by non-Black men. hooks describes photography as a particular form of resistance for African Americans. This is because it allows individuals to create images away from white representations of Blackness and can also be used as a 'tool of cultural recovery' that holds onto memories (which is critical, for so much of Black history has been wiped away by slavery) (hooks 1995, 60). Applying this to the images of Rihanna, although Rihanna is the image rather than the exclusive image-maker (discussed above), that does not mean she does not have agency here. Rihanna's repeated use of mythology connects her to the past and clearly influenced Hirst's creative decisions. A powerful Black woman in her own right, Rihanna, it seems, would not agree to a photoshoot she disliked. Taking into consideration the long history shared between the Gorgon and Black women, Rihanna as Medusa is particularly powerful image for the Black female spectator. To quote hooks:

The word remember (re-member) evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole. Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a new way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds. Using images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye.
hooks 1995, 64.

Thus, Rihanna's Medusa, her head 're-membered', evokes an image of a Black woman reconnected to her authentic identity, and this is symbolised by the snake hair. Dorothea Smartt interpreted Medusa's ancient myth as a white man's first glimpse of a Black woman

and claiming that she was a monster. Instead, Rihanna creates a *new* version of this narrative that is updated for the twenty-first century. Rihanna becomes a Black Medusa who revels in her beauty, her sexuality, and her racial identity. She, like Smartt, is reclaiming Medusa but is also challenging the way ancient history has been manipulated and appropriated to disparage Black men and women, and this empowers herself *and* her Black female fans.

Rihanna's image serves as a victory for Black women where, like Smartt's poem, Medusa is 're-remembered', her head is attached but *she* is detached from her use by culturally insensitive people. Rihanna continues to use her voice and image for Black women. This is evident from Rihanna's perceived response to the 'Marc Jacobs controversy' on the fifteenth of September 2016. On this date, fashion designer Marc Jacobs closed New York Fashion Week with his Spring 2017 collection, where predominantly white models wore dreadlocks. There was criticism with many viewing this as cultural appropriation, but it was Jacob's tone deaf comments that caused the most upset: '(To) all who cry "cultural appropriation" or whatever nonsense about any race or skin colour wearing their hair in any particular style or manner-funny how you don't criticise women of colour for straightening their hair' (qtd. in Rawlinson 2016). As has been explored in this chapter, Black women do not always straighten their hair out of *choice* but do so to be treated and viewed more positively in a Western society that displays conscious and unconscious racial biases. It can be, in a sense, an enforced assimilation.

The next month, in October, Rihanna debuted a new hairstyle: hip-length dreadlocks that she posted on *Instagram* (@badgalriri) alongside a reference to Bob Marley's 'Buffalo Soldier' (1983). The decision to change her long straight hair to dreadlocks could be read in response to the Jacob's controversy, but it also shows that Rihanna takes pride in her cultural heritage. After all, 'Buffalo Soldier' is a song thought to be in reference to the name given to African Americans by Native Americans who thought their hair texture was like Buffalo pelt (although this is disputed, see Frank. N. Schubert's 'From Black Regulars to Buffalo Soldiers' 2016). This highlights that Rihanna can interchange her Black hair by wearing straight hair, wigs etc, but all the while being proud of her identity. As a pop star, this is hugely influential to her Black fans and sends the message that they do not *have* to straighten their hair, there is an element of choice. Rihanna continues to push boundaries on magazine covers, and on the front cover of *Vogue UK* May 2020 edition became the first Black woman to grace the cover in a durag. The durag is a piece of fabric worn by both men and women that covers African-textured hair to protect it or aid in the stylization of braids, dreadlocks, or

waves. It has also been worn as a fashion statement by male hip-hop artists. Yet, it has been reduced to a fashion accessory by certain institutions that continue to regulate the way Black men and women wear their hair (Fetto 2020). In the pages inside *Vogue*, Rihanna further poses wearing African hairstyles while discussing the persistence of racism in both the US and the UK (Hirsch 2020). A comment left by a fan called Amy Stewart on her personal *Facebook* page clearly articulates why these images are so meaningful and powerful to Black women. Stewart posts a black and white image of a Black woman wearing her hair in a braided style in the same fashion as Rihanna inside the *Vogue* issue saying:

People asked me why I thought Rihanna's May *Vogue* catalog was a 'big deal'. This is why it's a big deal. They told us for years the picture on the left wasn't beautiful. Decades. What I love about her is she not only is welcomed in the rooms we weren't allowed in for years, she owns them and is respected in them. All while displaying Black beauty & success.

Stewart (2020)

Further, in 2019 when Rihanna created *Fenty Maison*, the fashion line to join her existing beauty line, the first campaign drew inspiration from the Grandassa models, a group of African American women in 1960s New York who took pride in their natural Black appearances. These women were photographed by Kwame Braithwaite to perpetuate the slogan 'Black is Beautiful'. Rihanna used Braithwaite's (a fellow Bajan) photographs as part of her fashion campaign saying: 'When I was coming up with the concept for this release, we were just digging and digging and we came up with these images – they made me feel they were relevant to what we are doing right now' (Rihanna to Mower for *Vogue* 2019).⁸⁷ As Rihanna says, these same issues continue, but she is here to confront them.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the relationship between Black women's hair and Medusa and has been framed around the topics of race and the gaze. It shows a Black woman who has agency over her image, and can revel in her sexuality, rather than simply being reduced to a sex object for men. It has also questioned *who* decides what is 'monstrous' and how certain racial narratives have been internalised as truths. Conventional beauty aesthetics have largely been aligned with whiteness, and this has led Black women to view themselves through the gaze of others and has consequently led many to disguise aspects of their Black selves by

⁸⁷ As I write this chapter, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests have highlighted significant inequalities of Black people living in majority-white societies. It has raised more awareness regarding the lack of training surrounding African-textured hair for hairdressers. There is currently a petition on change.org to challenge this ('Include Afro Hair Education in The Hairdressing NVQ' 2020).

changing the way they look. However, by identifying with Medusa, many Black women are trying to regain access to their 'Medusa-selves' to argue that she was never a 'monster', it just depended on *who* was looking at her and which narrative one chooses to listen to. Therefore, while white men may view Rihanna's image as the titillating, dangerous, sexual woman, Black female spectators can view her as a Black woman with 'natural hair' in reclamation of a negative racial slur. That Medusa is described by Smartt as her shield and that the poet connects Medusa to the trauma of being a Black woman, Rihanna's Medusa can be read as empowering for the pop star and to the Black female spectator. Further, by Rihanna incorporating Medusa's mythology alongside Egyptian mythical symbols, this pop star is returning to the past to challenge the way it has been received in the modern day, and its negation of Black people. This is an important topic that shall be returned to in the next chapter that analyses rapper Azealia Banks. In this chapter, I will use Medusa to again frame a discussion of race and the gaze, but rather than focusing on photographs, this will be in relation to the moving image. Therefore, I shall draw on hooks' film theory of the oppositional gaze.

Chapter 2

Shedding Skin: The Reappropriation of a White Medusa in Azealia Banks' 'Ice Princess' (2015)

Isis-Queen, the Icy-Witch
Winterfresh in that whitey-Benz
Shimmering Aphrodite...
'Ice Princess', Azealia Banks (2014).⁸⁸

Azealia Banks (b. 1991) is an African American rapper who rose to fame with her hit single '212' (featuring Lazy Jay) in 2012.⁸⁹ While she continues to impress music critics with her genre-defying music, she is also a highly controversial figure.⁹⁰ She juxtaposes using her platform to openly speak about Black women's issues with hurling homophobic and racist insults at other public figures (for example, Zayn Malik in 2016). Further, in 2016 she was criticised for using and selling skin whitening creams, a highly contentious issue that is steeped in racial history. Banks is thus revered and hated in equal measure, and some of her actions warrant reprimand. Yet, she is repeatedly treated poorly by a society that seeks to take away her voice, often dismissing her actions as 'crazy' when Banks has mental health issues (Jerkins 2017).⁹¹ As a woman who is repeatedly dismissed and silenced, her 'Ice Princess' (2015) music video becomes particularly worthy of analysis. It is in this video that Banks played the role of an icy white Medusa hybrid. The Gorgon, as discussed in the previous chapter, is a highly significant figure for Black women, but further than this, her lack of voice in the ancient myths is also symbolic of women who are denied a voice.⁹² This chapter will therefore argue that it is through her reappropriation of Medusa that Banks lets herself to be heard.

'Ice Princess' was the fourth single to be released from Banks' debut album *Broke with Expensive Taste* (2014). The lyrics contained references to Egyptian and Greco-Roman

⁸⁸ The lyrics here are referenced one year earlier than the music video because the song featured on the album *Broke with Expensive Taste*, which was released in 2014.

⁸⁹ Lazy Jay are the producers of the song.

⁹⁰ The album was given good reviews, particularly because it experimented with a range of genres (*Clash* magazine, for example, gave it 7/10).

⁹¹ Both skin lightening and Banks' mental health are discussed below.

⁹² Banks is not the first Black female rapper to use Medusa. Californian rapper Monae Smith goes by the stage name Medusa 'the Gangster Goddess'.

mythology (as quoted above), while the title alluded to Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Snow Queen* (1844), for 'ice' is to 'snow' what 'princess' is to 'queen'. The song used mythical and fairy tale images in conjunction with ice and snow to rap about 'diamonds and being frigid', themes Banks describes as being typical of the hip-hop genre (Banks 2014). The appropriation of ancient mythology and fairy tale became much more explicit in the accompanying music video (released on the thirty-first of March 2015). With the use of CGI, Azealia Banks became the 'Ice Princess'; a white-faced 'icy Medusa' with snake-hair who uses her Gorgon's gaze to literally freeze her enemies which are colourful blobs in an otherwise blue and white arctic landscape (WWM 2015). When I asked Marcella Moser, one half of the production company *WeWereMonkeys* who were behind the video, whether it was Azealia Banks' decision or that of the production team to reappropriate Medusa, Moser explained that it was 'WWM who wanted to feature Azealia as a fantastical version of Medusa' (personal conversation, eighth of May 2019).⁹³ WWM, it seems, were inspired by Banks' use of mythical and fairy tale lyrics to create a virtual Ice Princess: a hybrid figure that combines Medusa and the Snow Queen by playing on Medusa's ability to petrify (i.e., freeze) her enemies by giving her the Snow Queen's power to turn landscapes and animate beings to ice.

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, Medusa has repeatedly been reclaimed by Black female artists because of her African origins and her snake hair. The idea that Medusa was an African woman viewed as a monster by a white man because of her textured hair resonates with the experiences of countless Black women living in Western countries. However, I argue that something *different* is happening in this music video. The focus is on the white landscape and a Black woman as a *white* Medusa-Snow Queen hybrid who turns anything colourful *colourless* with her gaze. The video thus encourages a racial reading and I suggest that it can be used to explore Black women's relationship to the gaze. Building upon the previous chapter, I will use the ancient mythology and fairy tale inherent in the hybridity of the Ice Princess to analyse how Black women must repeatedly contend with seeing themselves through the eyes of others. The key theme that emerges in the video is *sight* via the Medusa's gaze and the reflective nature of the ice (which in *The Snow Queen* becomes a literal mirror), and I use this to argue that Black women do not see themselves reflected in retellings of Greco-Roman myths and fairy tale narratives. The video can then be applied as a lens through which to read Banks' use of the ancient world and folk tales in other areas of her

⁹³ WWM is an acronym for *WeWereMonkeys*.

work. I suggest that Banks uses these two forms of storytelling critically and to create something *new*, particularly as her onstage persona of a mermaid. Drawing on both myths and folk tales, Banks creates her own unique narrative via her image that empowers and ensures she is seen while giving her a voice, even when she is unable to speak.

Video Analysis

There is a lot to be said about the ‘Ice Princess’ music video as it is so rich in imagery. It begins with the sound of wind howling, and a palace made from ice, inspired by the ‘glacial’ palace of the Snow Queen (Andersen 1844, trans. by J. Hersholt), emerges from behind clouds. Ice Princess is first shown sitting in this palace on a throne of thorns carved from ice (indeed, everything in the palace is ice), and she is flanked on either side by two giant human skulls with fanged teeth. Her white face with slightly darker blue tones around her eyes and lips is inspired by the Snow Queen, whom Andersen described as ‘a woman, tall and slender and blinding white’ (Andersen 1844). A large cobra is curled around the base of the throne leading Fabien Bièvre-Perrin, in his analysis of the video found on *Antiquipop*, to interpret the giant snake as ‘evoking the dragon Nidhogg, the devourer of corpses’ (Bièvre-Perrin 2015). This is plausible as giants and Nidhogg are connected in Norse mythology, which may explain the giant skulls (their fangs may simply be another reference to snakes). Regarding the snakes that form the Ice Princess’ hair, they are cobras and thus Bièvre-Perrin (2015) suggests they evoke the Egyptian Uraeus – the decorative use of a cobra usually found on the crown of pharaohs which signified royalty and power (Gabriel 2002, 172). The visual manifestation of the Ice Princess as a Medusa with cobra snake-hair in this video thus combines both Egyptian and Greek mythology, which are also both referenced in the rap’s lyrics (quoted at the beginning of this chapter). It can be viewed as similar to Rihanna’s Medusa who also combines Egyptian myth (her Isis tattoo) with the snake-haired monster from Greco-Roman mythology. Both images seem to enhance the connection of Medusa with *Africa* because of the ancient Egyptian symbolism but also, of course, because these are Black women. It points to this idea of reclaiming Medusa as an African figure who is analogous to how white men have constructed Black women as especially Other. However, while the Ice Princess combines Egyptian and Greco-Roman mythology with the Snow Queen, the video as a whole amalgamates various mythological influences.



Fig. 2.1. Azealia Banks as the Ice Princess, 'Ice Princess' (2015)

This continues when the Ice Princess' colourful foes begin to emerge from a distant volcano. Her adversaries are abstract shape-shifting floating objects that contain kaleidoscopic patterns of bright colours that are moving and changing. Bièvre-Perrin interprets the volcano as also Nordic ('the subterranean volcanic lagoon of the monster' [Bièvre-Perrin 2015]), yet mythology from various cultures has served as an explanation for volcanic eruptions. In Greco-Roman mythology, for example, the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 BCE) states that Enceladus, a giant, was buried underneath Mount Etna and was used to explain the mountain's volcanic activity (*Aeneid* 3.570-587).⁹⁴ This could also provide another possible explanation for the giant's skulls at the beginning of the video that feature on the Ice Princess' throne. Aside from mythological influences, volcanoes play a role in Andersen's *The Snow Queen*. In the story, the Snow Queen kidnaps a young boy called Kay and takes him to her ice palace. In the following passage, she is leaving Kay so that she can spread her icy powers over 'warm countries':

'Now I am going to make a flying trip to the warm countries', the Snow Queen told him. 'I want to go and take a look into the black caldrons'. She meant the volcanos of Etna and Vesuvius. 'I must whiten them up a bit. They need it, and it will be such a relief after all those yellow lemons and purple grapes'.

Hans Christian Andersen, *The Snow Queen* (1844), trans. by J. Hersholt (1949)

Azealia Banks' Ice Princess, like the Snow Queen, wants a world devoid of colour; everything must be, to paraphrase the Snow Queen, 'whitened up a bit'.

⁹⁴ This was during the Gigantomachy. Apollodorus also mentions this but simply says 'Athena threw on him in his flight the island of Sicily' (*Bibliotheca* 1.6.2). Another similar story can be found in Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca* 1.6.3.



Fig. 2.2. Ice Princess stands between two male sculptures, 'Ice Princess' (2015)

The Ice Princess, however, is not going to face the colourful enemies emerging from the volcano alone. She has a large army of cyborg warriors and while she walks amongst her troops, they perform a hip-hop choreographed dance in sync, in what appears to be a futuristic war dance in preparation for battle.⁹⁵ To use *WWM*'s description of the video, this is a 'retro-futuristic' world (*WWM* 2015). After walking past her army, Ice Princess stands at the entrance to her palace, surveying the looming battlefield. To either side of her are two identical giant statues of muscular men, with each man holding what looks like a snake or an eel (see fig. 2.2.). A Medusa standing between two animals evokes the 'mistress of animals' pose found in ancient iconography, where a prominent female figure is found with animals on either side of her (the Temple of Artemis, Corfu c. 580 BCE, is an example. On this temple's pediment, Medusa is flanked on both sides by two lions and her children, Chrysaor and Pegasus). In the music video, the male statues that are on either side of the icy Medusa have closely cropped hair and Western features which look very similar to Nazi propaganda depictions of the Aryan race. This suggestion of Nazi iconography is also implicit in the following scene. At around one minute thirteen, the robotic soldiers raise their arms in salute to their princess while Banks raps, 'All hail the supreme Ice Princess!' ('Ice Princess' 2015). Noah Berlatsky, an author and online contributor for *ravishly* magazine, interprets this as a 'Nazi salute' reminiscent of scenes from the 1935 Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*

⁹⁵ These cyborgs have moulded bodies with breasts. However, *Fame Magazine* online says that Banks referred to these robots as 'bussyboys', a slang term for gay men: 'The irobots on the video are supposed to be the bussyboys! That's why they have the nice cakes...' ('Video Highlight: Azealia Banks "Ice Princess"' n.d.). That Banks says that the apparently female robots are actually an army of gay men suggests that she had some input over the direction of the music video. After all, Banks began to sell 'bussyboy soap' on her website in 2018 that apparently 'lightens and tightens' the anus (cheapyo.com).

(Berlatsky 2015).⁹⁶ Nazis used classical antiquity to promote their fascist ideology, and projected their racist views onto the white muscular marble statues from ancient Greece, when, in fact, the statues were not white in antiquity but multicoloured (mentioned below). Adolf Hitler particularly favoured the Discobolus of Myron statue (c. 460-450 BCE), which featured in the propaganda film *Olympia* (1938) to promote the German success at the 1936 Berlin Olympics (where, notably, Jessie Owens, an American Black man, won four gold medals, which led Hitler to feel humiliated). However, Greek and Roman statues were not white in the ancient world but were polychrome (Brinkmann 2008). Yet, early scholars, such as Johann J. Winckelmann in the eighteenth century, initially believed the classical Greek statues were white and that this was a conscious artistic decision by the Greeks who favoured ‘form’ rather than colour (Hägele 2013, 253). This apparent lack of colour was then used as evidence for Western superiority, following the line of argument that Greek art was more advanced than other cultures that used colour on their sculptures (as discussed by Jan Stubbe Østergaard, founder of an international research network on polychrome, in conversation with Margaret Talbot in 2018). That these sculptures were not originally shown as white often comes as a shock to most people, especially when video games and films, set in antiquity, continue to show the statues as monochromatic.⁹⁷ Further, far-right groups continue to draw from the Greco-Roman world as evidence of white superiority. The ‘Red Pill’ online community are an example (see Zuckerberg 2018).

The suggestion of Nazism in this video, I suggest, seems to point towards this ‘whitewashing’ of the classical world. Azealia Banks, a Black woman, becomes the Ice Princess, a white Hitler-like dictator, who turns everything in her path to ice via her Medusa gaze so that it ‘fits’ with her white snow and blue ice landscape. Even Medusa, a figure regularly stated to have been from Africa by ancient authors, is depicted as *white*. Further, Berlatsky reads the amalgamation of various mythologies as also pointing to white people who have pillaged and stolen from other cultures. By including a range of various mythical symbols Berlatsky argues that: ‘Banks is not so much appropriating whiteness as she is thinking about what appropriation means to whiteness, and how part of what it means to be white is to appropriate’ (Berlatsky 2015). I take a similar view and suggest that this video can

⁹⁶ Azealia Banks is not the first Black female rapper to use Nazi imagery in her music video. Nicki Minaj’s lyric video for *Only* (dir. by Jeffrey Osborne 2014) which featured Chris Brown, Drake, and Lil’ Wayne, shows the rapper as an animated dictator. Minaj apologised for the video saying that she ‘didn’t come up with the concept...I’d never condone Nazism in my art’ (qtd. in Grow 2014).

⁹⁷ As mentioned in the previous chapter, Medusa in video games is also mostly shown as white, despite her African origins. See footnote 55.

be read as a subversion of power dynamics. Banks' adoption of a white face to become a fascist leader shows that 'power', in its most heinous form, is based, superficially, on race.⁹⁸ Thus, Banks is showing that she only has to adopt a white face in order to enter this position of power. Further, by not becoming an overtly 'sexy Gorgon' like Rihanna, Banks embraces a monstrous role without being put off in fear of being reduced to the stereotype of the 'angry Black woman'. It is this angry Medusa, combined with her 'whitewashing' gaze, that I later argue points to the negation of Black women in classical and fairy tale narratives.

As the video continues, so does the appropriation of various myths. As the battle looms, at one minute fifty-six, Ice Princess is shown riding into combat on the gigantic flying cobra shown at the beginning of the video that was curled around her throne. Bièvre-Perrin reads this as 'evoking Asian mythology, for example, Kamakhya or Monasa, deities related to the serpents that transported the other Hindu divinities' or even Chinese mythology, where souls of the dead rode snake-like dragons (Bièvre-Perrin 2015). The snake does not have the arms with which Chinese dragons are so often pictured, and there could be another possible stylistic influence here. The snake could be read as the Greek *drakon* (Latin *draco*, from which the English 'dragon' derives). In Greek mythology the term *drakon* could be used 'at the fantastical extreme...to snakes of supernatural size and nature, often compounded with human or other animal forms, and often credited with fire-breathing or other varieties of fieriness' (Ogden 2013, 2). *Drakontes* could also fly. In Euripides' tragedy *Medea* (431 BCE), for example, Medea flees from Corinth just after she has murdered her children in a chariot (*Medea* 1415). In iconographic depictions of this episode, such as a Lucanian Red-Figure Calyx-Krater credited to the Policoro Painter c. 400 BCE, Medea's chariot is drawn by two snake-like flying *drakontes* positioned in front of the sun (see fig. 2.3.).⁹⁹

⁹⁸ She is almost akin to the African American trickster who, aware of power imbalances, would change their appearance or behaviour to manipulate the slave master and to momentarily subvert racial power imbalances. Tricksters are found in various cultures. The African American trickster arose as a projection of Black slave's 'double consciousness' (Du Bois 1903). This double consciousness is a combination of one's racial and American identity – essentially how they view themselves and how they are viewed by white Americans. Thus, tricksters in these stories (who can be either male or female) use their awareness of how others perceive them and use their wits to dupe the often more powerfully positioned enemy (such as in the stories of Br'er rabbit or John and his Old Master). I am not convinced that Azealia Banks is an African American trickster figure per se, as she dies at the end of the story, while the African American trickster usually (if not always) lives, but there is some similarity.

⁹⁹ In later depictions, such as that of the Faliscan artist (second half of the fourth century BCE) the *drakontes* are given wings (Ogden 2013, 199).



Fig. 2.3. Depicts Medea flying a chariot after murdering her two children (shown below Medea) (Face A). Lucanian Red-Figure Calyx-Krater, Policoro Painter c. 400 BCE, The Cleveland Museum of Art.

In the culminating scenes, and while riding her flying snake, Ice Princess directs her icy gaze at the source of the colourful entities: the volcano. As she hovers at the summit, she freezes over the crater and the colourful lava is unable to escape the thick ice that covers the volcano's mouth. Oddly, however, as Ice Princess is shown hovering at the top half of the screen, her robotic army begin drilling through the ice. The camera cuts to Ice Princess' mouth open in a silent scream reminiscent of Caravaggio's Medusa, and mimicked by the snakes on her head.¹⁰⁰ The lava escapes, shooting up to the sky where Ice Princess is airborne and engulfs both her and her army. Banks' princess is shown with her face contorted in agony as she becomes the colourful entity that she had been fighting, her white and blue body becoming a multi-coloured outline. The ending of the video suggests that Ice Princess' army have turned on her, she has been 'found out' and her attempt to trick them into believing she was white has not been a complete success. Finally, she becomes what she has attempted to hide, her 'colourful' true self underneath the white and blue exterior. It is the colourful entities that reign supreme and the video ends with the icy blue land being pierced by the static-like colourful lava that continues to shoot to the sky. Berlatsky thus concludes that Ice Princess, an 'avatar of white supremacy', becomes 'free from whiteness and its power' and

¹⁰⁰ The snakes as an extension of Medusa's self has been touched on the previous chapter (Lucan in his *Pharsalia*).

that the Ice Princess must be defeated so that ‘Azealia Banks, the woman of colour, can live’ (Berlatsky 2015).

However, Banks is not free from racial and gender power imbalances. Banks’ muted scream as a silenced Medusa points to how she is often silenced in real life. This is not just by white society (symbolised by the robots) but also Black men and women (symbolised by the suffocating lava that engulfs her). As an article titled ‘Azealia Banks and the Double Standard of Mental Illness’ for *Pitchfork* online magazine said: ‘In a now-deleted *Instagram* post, she stated that black people, particularly black men, told her how “ugly,” “skinny,” and “weird” she was, yet whenever she speaks out on this belittlement, she’s deemed the crazy one’ (Jerkins 2017). More recently, many have highlighted the different ways the media and the public have treated rapper Kanye West’s mental health issues compared to Azealia Banks, and even Britney Spears. Kanye West stated that he will run for president in the 2020 US elections, yet during his campaign, he clearly struggled with his bipolar disorder and displayed erratic behaviour. Though many have called for the media and the public to take this into consideration and to be more understanding of his mental health issues, many have noted that no such sympathy and consideration has been given to Azealia Banks, even though she has the same diagnosis as West (Poole 2020).

Further, many are quick to dismiss Azealia Banks because of the controversial lightening of her skin in real life. In a video uploaded to *Facebook* in 2016, and which has since been deleted, Banks admitted that she bleaches her skin. She added that she thought it was not ‘important to discuss the cultural significance of skin bleaching anymore’, because ‘nobody was upset when I was wearing 30-inch weaves and tearing out my edges and doing all that sh-t like that’, and that manipulating one’s African features (nose, skin tone, and hair) is the ‘falsification of self with being a black person in America’ (video since deleted, qtd. in Blay 2016). As a Black person, Banks said ‘you assimilate, and there are things you accept, not just out of necessity but things become norm because they just happen all the time’ (qtd. in Blay 2016). She also argued that the bleaching of her skin does not contradict the statements she had made regarding the poor treatment of Black people in America.¹⁰¹ For example, in 2014 she criticised white rapper Iggy Azalea for stealing Black culture and referred to it as a ‘cultural smudging’ (Banks qtd. in Molloy 2014). This was particularly

¹⁰¹ Many continue to view Azealia Banks as an empowering figure for Black women. For example, see Lauren K. Clark’s 2019 blog post titled ‘How Azealia Banks Teaches Us To Be Truthful To Our Stories, While Embracing Our Inner Fire!’.

because of Iggy seemingly referring to herself as a ‘runaway slave-master’ in one of her early songs ‘D.R.U.G.S’ (2011). However, Banks’ Black activist voice seems to be lost amongst the criticism for her repeated controversial behaviour, especially for bleaching her skin which is such a contentious subject.¹⁰² The preference for lighter skin originates from the trans-Atlantic slave trade, where slavers would give preferential treatment to lighter-skinned enslaved African people. This in turn led to certain favouritism for lighter-skinned Black people within the emancipated African American communities (see Byrd and Tharps 2014, 17-22). However, this continues today. Beauty is often associated with lighter skin, and this extends beyond Black Americans and is found in Asian communities as well. In 2017, *Vice* magazine made a short episode about skin lightening in Jamaica called *Dancehall and Bleaching at Caribbean Fashion Week* (2017). Although not in America, those who took part in the documentary said that it was the pressure to look like light-skinned African American celebrities, such as Beyoncé, that led Jamaican women to bleach their skin. Jamaican singer Spice has spoken out against the lightening of Black skin in her music video ‘Black Hypocrisy’ (2018). Spice highlights society’s preference for lighter brown skin, rather than black, and shows that pressures to have light skin also comes from Black men and women. Thus, while Black fans were justified in criticising Banks’ actions, perhaps more emphasis should have been placed on *why* Banks felt like she had to change her appearance.

Using the ‘Ice Princess’ video, I argue that classical myth and fairy tales can be read as contributing factors towards Banks’ complex identity issues. Both myth and fairy tale are didactic forms of storytelling that perpetuate cultural notions of ideal gendered behaviour and beauty, and which are taken as ‘truth’. As these stories are fictional, they can be manipulated to suit the needs of anyone who wishes to appropriate them, which is why they have often been used to reflect (consciously but not always) that white is better, white is beautiful. Using the ‘Ice Princess’ video, I argue that Banks is aware of this and aware of how others treat her because of her race. However, I also argue that Banks’ identity is complex and cannot be reduced to a Black woman who seemingly has a lack of agency and feels forced to change her appearance to become ‘less Black’. I argue that Banks, as well as other Black artists such

¹⁰² Even when Banks uploaded a picture in white make-up in 2015 to play her Ice Princess role, fans attacked her for using the hashtag ‘whiteface’. Banks responded by calling the white people who took issue with her wearing the white make-up on her *Twitter* account as ‘crackers’ (Banks’ *Twitter* account @AZEALIABANKS has since been suspended, thus taken from Stutz [2015]. Note that ‘crackers’ is a derogative slang word used to refer to white people). Banks continued her rant online saying that when fellow rapper Snoop Dogg used whiteface, he did not receive backlash, ending the tweet with the hashtag ‘misogynoir’. Misogynoir, a term coined by Black gay activist Moya Bailey in 2010, refers to a specific type of misogyny directed at Black women. However, even if Banks was not in ‘whiteface’, I still argue the video encourages a racial reading.

as Rihanna, use what is akin to a critical Ice Princess gaze to critique the reception and ‘whitewashing’ of ancient myths and fairy tales and subversively create their own narratives.

The Oppositional Gaze

As shown via mythical and fairy tale narratives, Black women’s access to the gaze is complicated because they do not often see multifaceted portrayals of themselves in popular culture. Black women are often reduced to a stereotype or negated and thus rarely see themselves reflected. Therefore, a Black woman as a petrifying Medusa is significant and useful for framing a discussion of Black women’s access to the gaze. Feminist gaze theory has rarely considered racial differences and often continues to present women as a homogeneous group. bell hooks addresses this in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992). Here she argues that Black women have a unique relationship with vision and have predominantly been denied the gaze. She begins by exploring how, as enslaved people, Black men and women were punished for looking at their masters, and notes that there have been cases where Black men in America were executed by white men for looking at white women. hooks argues that this denial of the gaze, or the complicated racial aspects of gazing, continue in relation to film spectatorship. She suggests that Hollywood films have provided a space where ‘Black men could enter an imaginative space of phallogentric power that mediated racial negation’, yet Black women have repeatedly been denied a relationship between spectator and the image (hooks 1992, 118). This is because Black women have historically been portrayed onscreen in either stereotypical racial roles (particularly the character of the ‘mammy’) or are not present at all: they are rarely the object of male desire like white women. There is thus a difference between the Black male’s gaze and the gaze of a Black woman.

Although films have developed over time to be more inclusive, with increased diversity behind and in front of the camera, there is still much room for improvement. hooks gives the example of director Spike Lee’s films where Black women (at the time hooks was writing), were inserted into the narrative as the object of male desire, thus simply replacing the white woman, rather than in a new and subversive role (1992, 126). hooks found that the lack of Black women onscreen, or the Black woman as reduced to a stereotype, led Black female spectators to either not watch these films or watch with a ‘masochistic look of victimization’ (1992, 120-121). Another option was to identify with the white woman onscreen rather than her Black female counterpart (hooks 1992, 120-121). However, hooks

suggests that through this lack of identification with the image onscreen, a different form of looking is created that is specific to Black women: the oppositional gaze.

The oppositional gaze occurs when there is a 'rupture': a distance formed between self and the image that opens to a more critical way of viewing films (hooks 1992, 117). To quote hooks:

That all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming desire to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality'.
hooks 1992, 116.

hooks argues that Black women can critically analyse images onscreen in a way that is more than simple 'resistance' but provides the opportunity to be subversive. As there is a distance between self and image, Black women can detach themselves from the screen in order not to passively watch cinema but to have a degree of agency and use it to discuss constructed power notions on screen via the negation of their presence (be it physically or via harmful racial stereotyping). hooks concludes: 'looking and looking back, black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future' (1992, 131).

Using hooks' theory, it is evident that Black women's access to vision is complex. As Black women have predominantly been denied the gaze, they have also been denied a source of power (for 'power is the gaze', Bevan 2020, 90). Yet, this denied access to vision offers Black women an opportunity to develop a unique and very powerful form of gaze that both critiques and allows a certain agency. I thus read the Ice Princess' Medusa gaze as an oppositional gaze. This is a Black woman who uses her gaze to look at the past *critically* (via the use of myth, Nazism, and fairy tale images in the video) to show a level of *whitewashing*. As this video is set in the future, it also follows hooks' use of history to 'invent the future' (1992, 131). Thus, even if Ice Princess dies in the closing scenes, the colours reign supreme. She has invented a future where whitewashing is ultimately unsuccessful. Further, Azealia Banks' Ice Princess appears to be more autonomous than her mythical counterpart. When Ice Princess petrifies her enemies by looking at them, her eyes emit a blue laser (akin to Ray Harryhausen's Medusa in *Clash of the Titans* [1981] who has green eyes that glow when she is about to petrify). This is a play on Medusa's ability to objectify those who look at her, and how she returns the gaze with her own, much like a mirror according to Jean-Pierre Vernant

(1991, 138). The body of ancient mythology that surrounds Medusa suggests that the Gorgon cannot control the gaze, she simply petrifies any animate being that meets her eyes with their own. The ancient sources seem to give Medusa less agency and suggest that this power renders her unable to have a companion (in a romantic sense or otherwise).¹⁰³ This draws parallels with some fan interpretations of 'Ice Princess' found on *YouTube*, where the 'lava' is read as love that Ice Princess, in her frigid role, turns to ice (*Just Johnnay* 2018). Yet, Ice Princess seems to choose to destroy this enemy of hers. She enters into battle with an army against the shape-shifting colourful foes and *seeks* them out. The entities in the 'Ice Princess' video do not have eyes, they cannot look. Therefore, unlike the myth where people or animals must look at Medusa and for her to return the gaze in order to petrify, Ice Princess is able to use the power of her gaze, it seems, on any animate object she pleases.¹⁰⁴

Therefore, using hooks' theory, it is clear that Black women can have a form of agency when looking, and this once again critiques Laura Mulvey's binary of the male/active and female/passive stance in cinema. The oppositional gaze can place the Black female subject in an active mode of looking, where there is a conscious refusal to identify with the Black or white woman onscreen, and who would not be 'duped by mainstream cinema':

Looking at films with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of the phallogocentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator. Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who could not take on the phallogocentric gaze, created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look' was continually deconstructed. hooks 1992, 122-3.

hooks' theory is still relevant. There is a distinct lack of diversity in popular culture (and elsewhere) that frequently produces one dimensional portrayals of Black characters. This includes the use of mythology and fairy tales in the modern day. Thus, I will use hooks' theory alongside the 'Ice Princess' video, to read African American engagement with the classical world and fairy tales.

¹⁰³ This excludes her Gorgon sisters: Stheno and Euryale.

¹⁰⁴ Also, Ice Princess looks at her cyborg army without petrifying them. This also raises a very modern question regarding the autonomy of robots and cyborgs and whether they can already be considered, in a sense, objectified.

African Americans and the Classics

I will first consider how African Americans engage with the classical world for, as discussed in the previous chapter, the classics have repeatedly been viewed through a white lens and appropriated to disparage Black people (and even to deny them a history). Even Medusa, a monster located in Africa, is largely shown as a white woman. As the classics have repeatedly been appropriated to show white superiority, so they have been used to perpetuate white female beauty. The figure of Andromeda, the princess whom Perseus marries after decapitating Medusa's head, illustrates this. Patricia B. Salzman-Mitchell in *A Web of Fantasies: Gaze, Image, and Gender in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (2005) points to two of Ovid's works, *Heroides* (5 BCE – 8 CE) and *Ars Amatoria* (c. 2 CE), where Andromeda is described as dark-skinned. The former is a poem spoken from the perspective of Sappho, the Lesbian poet from the Greek island of Lesbos (born c. 630 BCE).¹⁰⁵ In this fictional piece she has fallen in love with Phaon, a man bestowed with exceptional good looks by the goddess Aphrodite.¹⁰⁶ After having an affair with Sappho, Phaon moved away to Sicily, causing a distraught Sappho to throw herself off nearby cliffs. It was said that those who survived the fall would be cured of their broken heart, but Sappho dies and what remains is her letter to Phaon where she lists her imperfections to show that neither she, nor anyone else, can match his beauty:

I'm not fair-skinned, but Perseus found Cepheus' Andromeda
attractive, and she was dark (from darkest Ethiopia);
and white doves often have mates of a different colour.

Ovid, *Heroides* 15.35-7, trans. by P. Murgatroyd, B. Reeves and S. Parker, S. (2017)¹⁰⁷

Similarly, Andromeda's skin colour is mentioned in *Ars Amatoria*, a 'guide' on how to seduce women, where Ovid urges men not to overly critique women or to focus on their faults. After all:

Andromeda's complexion was never brought up with her
by the one with lively feathers on both his feet.

Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, 2.643-644, trans. by J. D. Hejduk (2014).

¹⁰⁵ Authorship is disputed, but Murgatroyd et al (2017, 173) do read it as Ovidian.

¹⁰⁶ The poem points to Sappho's love for women, as well. There are reports (although unreliable) that as well as women, Sappho had affairs with Alcaeus and Anacreon, two male poets. Yet, as Murgatroyd et al note, while the former was her contemporary, the latter was born fifty years after Sappho (2017, 184)! Therefore, 'Lesbian' is given with a capital letter, for she was from Lesbos. Whether she was a lesbian in the modern sense, is a matter of discussion.

¹⁰⁷ The Latin for 'fair-skinned' is *candida*.

Here, Andromeda’s skin colour appears to be a ‘fault’ that Perseus was able to look past. While Ovid mentions the darkness of Andromeda’s skin colour in unflattering terms, in the *Metamorphoses*, the main source for Ovid’s version of the myth, there is no mention of her complexion other than Perseus comparing her to a ‘marble statue’ (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.675). This has led Salzman-Mitchell to suggest that: ‘since the story takes place in Ethiopia, the reader is led at first to believe that Andromeda is Black, but the image of a marble statue is normally associated with pure whiteness of the body’ (2005, 81). However, marble statues in the ancient world would have been painted, so this does not seem strong enough evidence to suggest that Ovid is depicting Andromeda as *white*. There is also not concrete evidence, via cross-comparison with Ovid’s other texts and other ancient authors, that Andromeda was Black. Ovid in *Ars Amatoria* (1.53) says that Andromeda was from darkest *India* (in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, he locates India near to Ethiopia, 1.776-9), and in one contrasting example the Greek writer Pausanias says she was from Joppa (*Description of Greece* 4.35.9).¹⁰⁸ Further, images from the ancient world show Andromeda as a non-Black woman surrounded by Black servants, for example, a Pelike from 450-440 BCE shows Andromeda and her father Cepheus as light skinned compared to the Black servants who attend to them (see fig. 2.4.). Andromeda has curly hair, and Cepheus has ‘the thick lips, upturned nose, and curly hair of an Ethiopian’ (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). The light skin of both figures may point to them being bi-racial. However, I would certainly avoid applying a modern lens to read the image as an example of a hierarchy based on complexion.

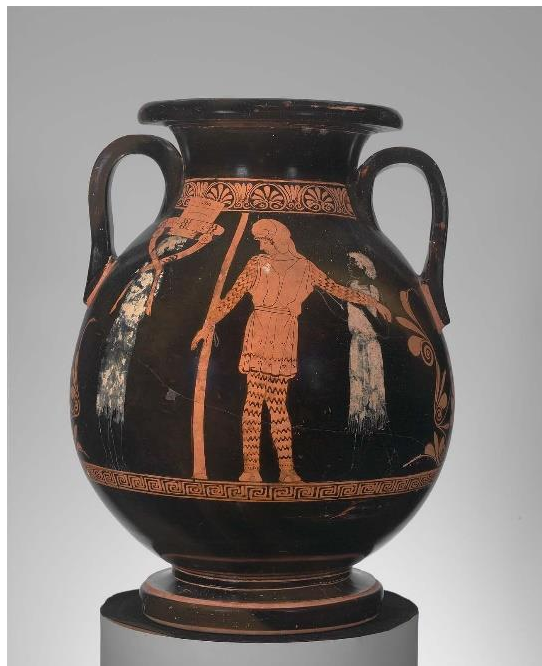


Fig. 2.4. Face A showing the Ethiopian princess Andromeda being dressed by what appears to be, a Black slave. Pelike, the Niobid Painter, c. 450–440 BCE. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 63.2663.

¹⁰⁸ Joppa is now called ‘Jaffa’, in modern Israel.

Therefore, there are unclear descriptions of Andromeda's race. Thus, although modern notions of race are very different to ancient ones, what Ovid's description of Andromeda as 'marble' does point to, however, is the *reception* of the princess in the post-classical world. Elizabeth McGrath in 'Black Andromeda' (1992) highlights that only very few artists, since the Renaissance period to the modern day, have depicted a dark-skinned Andromeda. This is likely because Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was taken as the 'canonical' version of the myth, and therefore would not have led Renaissance painters to believe that Andromeda would have been Black, or indeed, of a darker race than most of the Greeks (McGrath 1992, 16). Thus, as McGrath concludes, it was Ovid's use of 'marble' that 'effectively bleached Andromeda's colour away' (McGrath 1992, 16). During the trans-Atlantic slave trade, artists who were inspired by Ovid's tales continued to depict Andromeda as predominantly white, largely because of racist ideologies at the time which viewed whiteness as 'the prevailing norms of beauty' and 'ensured the suppression of the black Andromeda. Even for modern scholars she hardly exists' (McGrath 1992, 16). Certainly, with colonialism and slavery, Black women were constructed as less desirable or, almost paradoxically, overtly sexual, such as the treatment of Sara Baartman (also known derogatively as 'the Hottentot Venus', see previous chapter). It was also evident when the French painter Marie-Guillemine Benoist painted a portrait of a Black servant in a piece titled *The Portrait of Madeleine* (1800), to which critics responded to the woman in the painting as 'hideous', while others were horrified that it was 'a white and pretty hand that made us this noirceur', a word scholar Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby clarifies as 'meaning blackness but also, revealingly, baseness, heinousness, even atrocity' (Grigsby 2002, 59).¹⁰⁹

Yet, what if not mentioning Andromeda's skin colouring as dark was a conscious choice by Ovid, as Salzman-Mitchell suggests? In *Heroides* 15 and *Ars Amatoria* Ovid is writing from the perspective that the Ethiopian princess' skin colour was a flaw. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid is writing from the viewpoint of Perseus and is trying to convey the absolute beauty of Andromeda. So beautiful and statuesque is Andromeda that she is dangerous, and Perseus becomes immobile as he fixates his gaze upon her, almost falling from the sky in the process (a play on the danger of women, and linking Andromeda with

¹⁰⁹ Previously known as *Portrait of a Negress*. Madeleine was not her actual name; this had been taken from her. This portrait of a Black servant with her right breast unveiled was created just two years before Napoleon reinstated slavery and may explain why the portrait was given harsh reviews by contemporary critics. Note that this painting is also used in The Carter's music video 'APESHIT', discussed below.

Medusa's ability to petrify).¹¹⁰ Therefore, Ovid may have purposefully left out a description of Andromeda's skin colouring because dark skin was not considered as attractive to his Greek and Roman audience (Salzman-Mitchell 2005, 82). Although, as McGrath says, it also reveals that inter-racial sexual relationships were not abnormal in the Roman world (McGrath 1992, 10). I am not using this as evidence of Benjamin Isaac's (2006) proto-racism per se, but as possible evidence from the ancient world of men creating and dictating images of beauty based on skin colour.¹¹¹ Perseus is thus the maker of images, for the reader identifies with Perseus' gaze to envisage Medusa as a monster (when, *perhaps* she was a Black woman with locked hair, see Smartt previous chapter) and Andromeda as passive and beautiful: 'Perseus is a master of mirror and reflection, which is why he can manipulate the girl's image and even give a reflection of Andromeda that is sieved through his own subjectivity' (Salzman-Mitchell 2005, 82).

However, Perseus' gaze is fragile. It was nearly taken away by Medusa, and Andromeda's ability to fixate his gaze nearly led him to fall from the sky. Therefore, Perseus' gaze can be destabilised by the reader by looking past the images he provides. By applying a resisting gaze to 'decompose the layers of reflection that the master of the mirror imposes on us' Andromeda can be read as a beautiful dark-skinned woman (be that Indian, or Black African) (Salzman-Mitchell 2005, 84). What Salzman-Mitchell is unwittingly describing is the oppositional gaze that Black women must repeatedly apply to find themselves in texts, especially in classical mythology that has been appropriated to perpetuate white superiority. This is a clear example of the Ice Princess' gaze in action, where a critical eye reveals how the classical world has, in various ways, been 'whitewashed'. It also reveals why so many African American artists are turning to the ancient world with their oppositional gaze in order to challenge the way the classical world has been used to disparage Black people, particularly Black women.

Reclaiming the Classics: Black Women as Art and Artist

Several Black female artists, including Rihanna and Azealia Banks, are using the ancient world to reclaim a history from which they have been barred. As Banks said in an interview with *Playboy* magazine, African Americans deserve to be taught their history that 'doesn't

¹¹⁰ Andromeda does not pose a real threat to Perseus, because she looks away with her downcast gaze. It is she who is subject to the male's gaze, just as Medusa was defeated by Perseus being able to look at her.

¹¹¹ There are gendered aspects to the whiteness of skin too. As philosophy historian Maria Michela Sassi discusses in *The Science of Man in Ancient Greece* (1988), the whiteness of a woman's skin was a Greek ideal which reflected that a woman's place was (ideally) indoors.

start from the boat ride over from Africa' (Banks speaking to *Playboy*, 2015 qtd. in Tinsley 2018, 145). She continues:

All you know as a black kid is we came over here on a boat, we didn't have anything and we still don't have anything. But what was happening in Africa? What culture were we pulled away from? That information is vital to the survival of a young black soul.

Azealia Banks in *Playboy* magazine 2015, qtd. in Tinsley 2018, 145.

By turning to the ancient Egyptian and classical world, these Black artists are highlighting how their history has been stolen, and how history has been manipulated to disparage Black people and to uphold white supremacy, by inserting themselves into these narratives. Particularly reading ancient Egypt as being part of Black Africa can be empowering, for it gives Black people a history that acknowledges ancient contribution to world history, rather than having a past that is reduced to slavery, pain, and torture. Aside from Azealia Banks and Rihanna, one of the most explicit examples of Black artists challenging how history has been received is Beyoncé and her husband Jay-Z's (known collectively as The Carters) music video 'APESHIT' (directed by Ricky Saiz in 2018).¹¹² An analysis of this video is helpful for further exploring how Black artists are applying their 'Ice Princess' oppositional gaze across the portrayal of the ancient world in the modern day, as well as how Black artists can subversively insert themselves into ancient history and mythology.

'APESHIT' is taken from the couple's debut album *Everything is Love* (2018) and in the video, Beyoncé, Jay-Z, and their majority Black dancers take over the Louvre.¹¹³ At various points in the video, The Carters and their dancers are positioned in front of art pieces across the museum to highlight the lack of Black figures, be it the subjects of the art or artists (Helen Morales notes that the Louvre 'houses roughly six thousand paintings, but only twenty-one women artists in the collection, and none are identified as women of colour' [2020, 110]). In the museum, there is a small department for the Arts of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, but the Egyptian artefacts are displayed next to the Greek and Roman items, thus to again quote Morales: 'The Louvre displays Egyptian antiquities along with the Greek and Roman collections as part of the "European" art. In doing so, it claims Egyptian art as part of the heritage of French culture and excludes it from the African art

¹¹² 'Apehit' means to go crazy but it also has racial connotations. 'Ape' can refer to a racial slur. In Jay-Z's rap during 'Apehit' he repeatedly refers to gorillas, monkeys, and being in a zoo. The song is thus reclaiming a racial slur and using it to show his and Beyoncé's success.

¹¹³ I believe there is one white dancer who does not take up much screen time and is not shown in front of the artworks.

collections' (Morales 2020, 114). History been manipulated by certain groups to convey a message of white superiority, and thus Black artists such as Rihanna, Azealia Banks, and The Carters attempt to reclaim it but also create something *new*. Therefore, Beyoncé et al in the video *become* the art by drawing the gaze away from the predominantly white statues and figures on the walls, and onto the Black figures in front of them.¹¹⁴ There is much to be said about this video, but what is most useful for this analysis and which can be used in connection with Banks, is how Beyoncé in particular engages with the classical pieces and what it says about Black female beauty.

There are several classical sculptures used in the video, and at one minute and four seconds, Beyoncé's Black female dancers stand on pedestals, replacing white statue figures with Black ones. Beyoncé also stands (alongside Jay-Z) in front of the Venus de Milo (c. 100 BCE) at three minutes fifty-three. The statue has often been considered the essence of feminine beauty and, like many others from the ancient world, is now white. Thus, a beautiful Black woman dancing in proximity and redirecting the onlooker's gaze away from the statue and onto Beyoncé challenges racial beauty ideals. The goddess Venus has repeatedly been used as a qualifier of female beauty, but there is a different relationship between the goddess and Black women, and this has been discussed by Helen Morales (2020). As has been mentioned, Sara Baartman was referred to derogatively as the Hottentot Venus, but prior to Baartman a 'Black Venus' was mentioned in Isaac Teale's 'The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies' (1765, although first published in 1793) (noted by Morales 2020, 103). The poem essentially depicts the Black female slave as a beautiful sable Venus, an overtly sexual woman who incites the uncontrollable lust of white men. The poem implies that it is the 'author's duty' to rape these women who 'are assumed to desire the process' (Wood 2003, 30-31). Baartman was similarly viewed as overtly sexual because of her large bottom and labia, and it is likely that she was sold into sex work, and how she was treated and viewed set the precedent for the way Black women are still fetishized as the 'exotic other' in contemporary society. In other examples of 'Black Venuses', Helen Morales gives the examples of Black performers Lena Horne, b. 1917-2010, ('the bronze Venus') and Josephine Baker, b. 1906-1975, (referred to as both 'the ebony Venus' and 'the Black

¹¹⁴ Inspiration for the video may have taken from Faith Ringgold's *Dancing at the Louvre* (1991), as noted by Liedeke Plate (2018). Ringgold's embroidered quilt art piece is accompanied with a short story and shows a young Black woman who has moved to Paris in the early twentieth century and who visits the Louvre with a Black family of a mother and her three children. They are all shown dancing in front of the Mona Lisa, and thus drawing attention away from the pieces on the walls and on to themselves.

Venus’) (Morales 2020, 101). As Morales notes, however, ‘the qualifiers bronze, ebony, and Black suggest that without them we are meant to assume Venus is white’ (Morales 2020, 101).¹¹⁵

Beyoncé in the role of Venus thus becomes subversive, and it is not the first time she has become the goddess in her work. In 2017, Beyoncé uploaded a series of pregnancy photographs on her *Instagram* and her website (beyonce.com), shot by Ethiopian artist Awol Erizku. In these photographs, Beyoncé recreated the pose of Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus* (c.1510), and Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* (c.1486), though in the latter image ‘instead of the wind god, Nefertiti, the ancient Egyptian queen, attends her’ (Morales 2020, 105). In another, Beyoncé is shown underwater wearing a yellow dress, evoking the African water deities (orishas) Oshun and Yemoja from the Yoruba religion. Both goddesses are associated with motherhood and fertility, and Oshun is often shown in water and wearing yellow. Beyoncé as a pregnant Venus escapes ‘the common trap for Black Venuses: denigration and hyper sexualization’ while she also ‘makes Venus share her throne with African deities’ (Morales 2020, 105-6). Beyoncé is creating something *new* here and has clear agency. She is blending various myths and traditions to reflect her identity as a Black American woman. Returning to the Venus de Milo in the ‘APESHIT’ video, it is particularly fitting that Beyoncé stands here hand in hand with Jay-Z. Jay-Z is known to have had an affair with a woman to whom Beyoncé refers in her song ‘Sorry’ (2016) as ‘Becky with the Good Hair’. The line used by Beyoncé certainly has racial connotations. ‘Good’ hair, as described in the previous chapter, refers to European-type hair that is thought to be preferable and more attractive than natural African hair. This has led many to deduce that the woman with whom Jay-Z had an affair was white (for example, see Weiss 2016). Thus, in the video for ‘Sorry’, Beyoncé takes pride in her Black beauty by wearing her hair in a braided style to resemble the headdress of Nefertiti.¹¹⁶ She uses the Egyptian queen and Venus to assert African American beauty in the modern day.

¹¹⁵ More recently, singer Janelle Monae posed as a ‘Black Venus’ for *Shape* magazine’s September 2020 issue and uploaded on to Monae’s *Instagram* page (@janellemonae 2020). Also note that, as the Greco-Roman gods could not be seen in their true form by human eyes, there is nothing to suggest that they cannot be portrayed Black, or indeed any race.

¹¹⁶ Claiming Egyptian history is also found in ‘APESHIT’ when Beyoncé and Jay-Z are pictured in front of the *Great Sphinx of Tanis* (Egyptian, 2600 BCE) and by singing ‘I can’t believe we made it’ in front of this sculpture, they are ‘staking a claim to the Sphinx as a monument created by, and belonging to, Africans and their descendant’ (Morales 2020, 114).

The Carters thus provide another example from popular culture of Black artists turning to the past to critique and to create something *new*.¹¹⁷ Beyoncé particularly engages with ancient mythology and combines it with African religious traditions to challenge past harmful stereotypes of women as fetishized bodies, and instead creates images of Black pride and beauty. This is something Smartt also does in her poem ‘medusa: cuts both ways’ cited in the previous chapter. These are Black women who are creating their own narratives. As I shall discuss below, Banks also combines ancient myth with African religion in her work and to create her image, but she also does this by using fairy tale.

Myths and fairy tales are not dissimilar. They can both be moulded to reflect certain cultural gender, and even beauty, ideals. Using Medusa and Andromeda as an example, while the passive Andromeda is a beautiful non-threatening virgin whom Perseus marries, Medusa can be read as a monstrous woman who is punished for pre-marital sex and, as a woman who dares to look, for having some level of agency via the gaze. It is clear what gendered behaviour is desired, but it is portrayed through a male lens, in this case, Perseus’ gaze. European fairy tales as they have been received and told in modern society are, in a similar sense, harmful to Black girls and women because they teach reductive and outdated values regarding gender, but also *race*. This can be explored by using the themes of fairy tales and reflection that are found in the ‘Ice Princess’ video. The reflective nature of ice can be used to frame a discussion regarding Black women and sight, and how one’s reflection can become distorted by the views of society. This can, in some way, explain why Banks has issues regarding her image as a Black woman. However, as I shall discuss below, I also argue that Banks’ identity is *complex* and that, while she absorbs harmful racial messages, she also rejects the reflections given to her by society, and creates her own hybrid image by combining myth, fairy tale, and African religious traditions to create her own narrative.

¹¹⁷ This extends beyond the classics in the video. When Beyoncé is shown in front of Jacques-Louis David’s *The Coronation of Napoleon* (1804) it appears as if she is being coronated rather than the empress Joséphine. Beyoncé, like the empress Joséphine, is descended from a slaver (Beyoncé speaks about this in *Vogue*, September 2018). In this scene there is thus a ‘transfer of the symbol of sovereign power from one daughter of a slaver to another’ (Plate 2018).

Further, Jay-Z also raps in front of Théodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*. As discussed in the previous chapter, the structure of the painting is divided into two pyramids. Jay-Z becomes aligned with the Black man at the top of the pyramid to the right of the spectator. It points to how Jay-Z is on top of a different kind of pyramid: an economic one.

The Mirror and Fairy Tales

The 'Ice Princess' lyrics clearly use fairy tale imagery: 'tell the carriage hurry up and come and get me', evokes Cinderella going to the ball, or even the carriage the Snow Queen rides in, and 'Rolls Royce, Snow white-ups' suggests the princess Snow White ('Ice Princess' 2014). It is the video that most heavily draws on Andersen's *The Snow Queen* (1844). In *The Snow Queen*, the reflective nature of ice becomes a literal mirror: the 'Mirror of Reason' (discussed in more depth below). The Snow Queen's mirror, I suggest, can be used to extrapolate another aspect of Black women's relationship with vision: looking at their reflection. Fairy tales in modern culture are best-known from the versions that Disney provide in their films, and there is a distinct lack of Black women. This becomes problematic when young girls consistently look to Disney's princesses as the essence of femininity and beauty. Before a further discussion of *The Snow Queen* and how it is useful for my analysis, I shall first discuss how fairy tales can lead Black women, like Banks, to have complicated views regarding their own appearance because of their race.

Although folk tales exist in all cultures, European tales are the ones that have been reworked by Disney and propelled onto a global stage for consumption. The tales told by Disney conform to a familiar pattern and they often disregard the nuances of the original stories. In one of the early versions of *Cinderella*, for example, called 'The Cat Cinderella' by Giambattista Basile (c. 1634), Basile had Cinderella murder her step-mother.¹¹⁸ Charles Perrault gave his own version in 1697, under the title 'Cinderella; or the Little Glass Slipper' and turned Cinderella into a more helpless and solely good character – gone is her murdering past. It is Perrault's version that Disney adopted for their film, and it shows how, like myths, different versions exist and are chosen to be repeated based on cultural ideals of the time, as discussed in chapter three (see also Zipes, Greenhill and Magnus-Johnston 2015). What Disney has subliminally taught young girls since their first feature length film *Snow White* (1937) is that non-Black, young girls rely on their beauty to be saved by a prince from evil witches or stepmothers. A happily ever after is achieved upon entry into a heteronormative marriage, and this is where the story ends. According to the site *Disney Avenue*, Disney's filmmaking can be split into seven eras. The first animated film, as mentioned, was *Snow White* in 1937, during what is referred to as their 'Golden Age' era (1937-1942). In the

¹¹⁸ Originally published in the *Pentamerone* a collection of folk tales thought to be from Naples and originally published in Neapolitan dialect. The young girl in this tale is called Zezolla (it is later in the story that she is given the name 'Cat Cinderella').

‘Disney Renaissance’ (1989-1999), Disney introduced their first non-white princesses: Jasmine in *Aladdin* (1992), and the eponymous characters *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998). It was not until the ‘Revival Era’ (c. 2009-present) that Disney introduced its first Black princess: Tiana in *The Frog Princess* (2009). However, this fairy tale was also strongly criticised because the first Black Disney princess spent most of the time onscreen as an amphibian (Barnes 2009).

As children’s brains are akin to sponges, that absorb what society is projecting onto them to make sense of their role and identity in the world, Disney’s form of storytelling has real implications (Rippon 2020). In a study conducted by Elizabeth Yeoman (1999), a group of children were read a Cinderella-type story called *The Talking Eggs* (Robert D. San Souci, 1989, and based on an old Creole folktale) where the protagonist, Blanche, is Black.¹¹⁹ Without showing the children what Blanche looked like in the book’s illustrations, the children were then asked to draw her. Yeoman found that the class ‘almost invariably drew White characters, no matter what colour they were themselves’ (Yeoman 1999, 437). When asking some of the children why they drew the character of Blanche *white*, one replied that she ‘drew her yellow (haired)...she was good, so I wanted to make her pretty’ (Yeoman 1999, 438).¹²⁰ The children had clearly associated the tale with Disney’s *Cinderella*, and a white blonde woman was shown to encapsulate beauty and goodness.¹²¹ The notion that it is these stories that dictate female beauty ideals is found in Disney’s *Snow White* and the evil queen’s anthropomorphic mirror. As Jack Zipes discusses in *The Enchanted Screen* (2011), the mirror in this film becomes an eery white mask with a man’s voice. When the queen looks into the mirror and asks, ‘who is the fairest one of all’, rather than studying her own face, she is met with the mask who tells her that it is her stepdaughter Snow White: ‘a lovely maid I see...she is more fair than thee...Lips red as the rose. Hair black as ebony. Skin white as snow’ (*Snow White* 1937). However, Zipes points to the beauty of the queen who is arguably more striking than her stepdaughter, yet the mirror is taken as truth: ‘the mirror itself is never neutral and sets an arbitrary standard of beauty, for we know there is no such thing as essential beauty’ (2011, 116). The mirror can be read as patriarchal society that dictates women’s beauty by offering their own reflection. It draws comparisons with (white)

¹¹⁹ Yeoman conducted the study in a Canadian school and describes the group of children as between nine and eleven years old and diverse in terms of ethnic origin and socio-economic background (Yeoman 1999, 428).

¹²⁰ D. L. Hurley in ‘Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess’ (2005) also suggests Disney perpetuates a white and black dichotomy, where white is good and black is evil.

¹²¹ Similarly, one report showed that young Black girls did not like to play with Black dolls as they considered them ugly or ‘bad’ (*A Girl Like Me* [2005] by Kiri Davis who conducted the ‘doll test’).

men reflecting women's images as discussed in relation to Perseus' mirrored shield above, while also showing how women are reduced to their looks and pitted against one another.¹²²

This fairy tale is played on by African American artist Carrie Mae Weems in her piece called *Mirror, Mirror*, part of her photography series *Ain't Jokin'* (1987-1988). In this photograph, a Black woman looks into a mirror, but her reflection is that of a white woman. The image plays on the *Snow White* fairy tale and the idea of seeing oneself through the eyes of the other. The following caption is given underneath the photograph:

Looking into the mirror, the black woman asked, 'mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the finest of them all?'

The mirror says, 'snow white, you black bitch, and don't you forget it!!!'
Carrie Mae Weems, *Mirror, Mirror* (1987-1988).

Weems' use of European fairy tale here points to beauty being aligned with white skin, with images in popular culture perpetuating this preference. Yet, unlike the face in the mirror in *Snow White*, the face (and thus the mirror) is a white woman who tells the Black woman that she is inferior. The Black woman does not actually see her own reflection and, as in the Disney tale, takes what the mirror says as *truth*. Further, like the *Snow White* tale, women are pitted against each other. The idea of the mirror as distortive and being a white woman is also found in *The Snow Queen*.

In 'Ice Princess', Banks' character sits on a throne in a chamber of ice in her frozen palace. In *The Snow Queen*, the eponymous queen similarly sits in a chamber on a throne on top of a cracked frozen lake called the 'Mirror of Reason'. The mirror is a significant element of this fairy tale which begins with the Devil creating a distortive mirror, which turns good into evil in its reflection, and is carried up to heaven so that its power can be used against the angels (Andersen's story has a distinctly Christian theme). The mirror also makes people look 'ugly' in its reflection: 'Their faces were distorted beyond any recognition, and if a person had a freckle it was sure to spread until it covered both nose and mouth' (Andersen 1844). However, the mirror fell, and the tiny, shattered shards landed on the people on earth below: 'Once they got in people's eyes they would stay there. These bits of glass distorted everything the people saw, and made them see only the bad side of things' (Andersen 1844). One of those affected is a young boy called Kay who is captured by the Snow Queen who takes him to her 'driven snow' and ice palace and orders him to re-arrange the cracked

¹²² Similarly, in *Cinderella*, where the 'ugly' stepsisters compete with each other and Cinderella.

‘Mirror of Reason’ so that it spells the word ‘eternity’ (Andersen 1844). Wolfgang Lederer in his literary criticism of the tale thus reads the mirror *and* the Snow Queen as the Devil (Lederer 1986, 65).¹²³ I suggest there is an interesting link here with Banks’ ‘Ice Princess’ lyrics.

During the rap, Banks mentions Anna Wintour, the editor-in-chief of American fashion magazine *Vogue* since 1988: ‘Colder than December, my diamonds on Anna Wintour’ (‘Ice Princess’ 2014). When diamonds are shown in the music video cut from ice (playing on the slang use of ‘ice’ for jewels in hip-hop), they surround the Ice Princess while she sits on her throne in her palace, evoking the Snow Queen. I thus also suggest that Anna Wintour can be read as a *real-life* Snow Queen. Wintour is a very powerful white woman working in the fashion industry and, like Andersen’s queen, is also read as the Devil for she is believed to be the inspiration for the character Miranda Priestly in the book *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003) written by Lauren Weinberger. The book was later adapted for film in 2006 where Meryl Streep played the devilish Priestly. Wintour can be read as creating distortive mirrors because fashion magazines such as *Vogue* reflect to society, and primarily directed at women, current trends and beauty standards. Even in the film, Priestly only begins to take her new personal assistant Andy (played by Anne Hathaway) seriously when Andy begins to change her appearance to become more fashionable. *Vogue* has often come under fire for its lack of inclusivity in the past (for example, *Vogue*’s March 2017 cover featured seven models of various ethnicities to make a statement about America and diversity. As many noted, however, all seven models were light-skinned). Beyoncé even spoke about the lack of Black women on magazine covers (not just *Vogue*’s) in her written piece for the magazine’s September 2018 issue:

When I first started, 21 years ago, I was told that it was hard for me to get onto covers of magazines because black people did not sell. Clearly that has been proven a myth. Not only is an African American on the cover of the most important month for *Vogue*, this is the first ever *Vogue* cover shot by an African American photographer. Beyoncé, *Vogue* (US) September 2018.

Beyoncé shows how times have changed but also that this is the first time the front cover has been photographed by an African American, which also points to how beauty is often shot through a non-Black lens. Wintour is a white, successful, and wealthy businesswoman but her

¹²³ This is, in part, because the Snow Queen reminds Lederer of the following passage from the Bible, where Satan takes Jesus to the top of a mountain and promises to give him anything he desires if he worships him (Matt. 4:8-10). Similarly, the Snow Queen promises Kay that if he rearranges the Mirror of Reason to spell ‘eternity’ she will make him the master of his own world and give him a new pair of skates (Lederer 1986, 65).

role as editor-in-chief for *Vogue* shows that she too can be read as creating distorted reflections in mirror images, when women absorb (often unattainable) beauty ideals. She has also admitted that she has not done enough in the past to help Black women join her on her pedestal in various roles across the fashion industry (Ferrier 2020).¹²⁴

The concept of Black women seeing themselves through the eyes of others, including here white men and women who act as mirrors that reflect beauty ideals that are taken as ‘truth’, has real implications when trying to view their own reflection. Returning to Lacan’s mirror theory is useful here. As has been discussed, the mirror stage is the development of the ego, which relies on primary caregivers to reflect positive affirmations of your identity. One’s identity is thus developed by using others around you as mirrors, and this continues throughout life. This becomes complicated for the Black subject, as shown in another of Weems’ images, where a black and white photograph of a young Black boy has the following caption underneath: ‘When asked what he wants to be when he grows up, the black boy says: “I want to be a white man cause my mama say, “a n----r ain’t sh-t”’ (Weems, 1987-88). The photo reveals the problems that arise in Black infants when developing their own identity when they are told, even by their primary caregiver, that they are inferior because of their race.

Carol Allen in *Black Women Intellectuals* (1998) thus critiques Lacan’s theory. She argues that the mirror stage does not consider racial differences and cannot be universally applied because Black girl’s access to their true image, which is clouded by racial prejudices and stereotypes, is incredibly difficult and impacts their formation of identity. According to Allen, for the male and female Black subject: ‘the American media and the culture industry which created slanted, often grotesque, representations of black people, the act of looking in a mirror in itself becomes highly charged and eminently social’ (Allen 1998, 66). With Black subjects viewing themselves through the eyes of others, stereotypes of their race are absorbed. The act of looking in the mirror at the self thus becomes political for Black people, but especially Black women who either do not see themselves reflected in culture or are told, either outright or subliminally, that they are less attractive than white women, as shown in this chapter via the manipulation of ancient myth and fairy tale. The image the Black subject has of their self is complicated by the image imposed on them by societal racial prejudices

¹²⁴ Wintour said: ‘I want to say plainly that I know *Vogue* has not found enough ways to elevate and give space to black editors, writers, photographers, designers and other creators. We have made mistakes too, publishing images or stories that have been hurtful or intolerant. I take full responsibility for those mistakes’ (qtd. in *The Guardian*, Ferrier 2020).

and stereotypes, which may result in a distorted version of reality and thus a false sense of ‘I’. By viewing the self through the eyes of others, the Black subject can experience a ‘double consciousness’, that juxtaposes how one views the self as well as how others perceive them (as first discussed by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903), and a fractured identity. As Allen concludes, ‘the black youth had to wait until she was old enough to unpack racial codes before she could find a stable reflection’ (1998, 67).

The idea of viewing the self through the eyes of others has led Nahum Welang (2018) to coin his triple consciousness theory (TCT) that builds upon Du Bois’ ‘double consciousness’, mentioned above. Welang argues that Du Bois’ standpoint focused on Black men and disregarded Black women who have to view themselves ‘through three lenses and not two: America, blackness and womanhood’ (Welang 2018, 296). Black American women must take into consideration their oppression by white men and women, as well as Black men who have often used misogyny against Black women in a bid to elevate their own status due to oppression. As Azealia Banks wrote on her *Twitter* account one month before the release of ‘Ice Princess’: ‘men in general despise dark skinned women’ (Banks, 2015. qtd. in Blay, 2016). Therefore, TCT is a more fitting theory through which to consider Black American women’s perception of self, as it further highlights the complexities surrounding Black women’s identity. TCT points to how Black women must navigate the way they are viewed by others that distorts the way they see themselves. However, Black women can adopt an oppositional gaze to critique the ways in which society perpetuates and dictates beauty ideals, and reject them. Instead, Black women can create their own spaces and narratives by creating their ‘alternate selves and reimagining their identities’ (Welang 2018, 305) by using their oppositional gaze. Thus, I suggest that Azealia Banks, though she clearly has problematic issues relating to her image (such as the whitening of her skin), is not devoid of agency or Black pride. Using the ‘Ice Princess’ video, I have argued that Greco-Roman mythology and fairy tales have been used to perpetuate white supremacy and, in turn, explain why a Black woman like Banks would have problems with her image. However, using the Ice Princess gaze, I also argue that Black artists can critically engage with these narratives and subversively create their own images and stories by reappropriating them. This, I argue, is what Azealia Banks does, and that she is particularly unique in the way that she uses both

classical and fairy tale imagery in her work that is not seen on quite the same level by other rap artists.¹²⁵

Fantasea

As discussed, Banks used both fairy tale and classical myth in ‘Ice Princess’, but it is also found elsewhere in her work, particularly her *Fantasea* mixtape that she released in 2012. The title *Fantasea* is visibly a play on the word ‘fantasy’ but also suggests an amalgamation of Walt Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940) and the word ‘sea’. There is an overall sea theme to the mixtape, and references to Greco-Roman nautical mythology are used alongside mermaid imagery. Using the Ice Princess music video as reference, I suggest that Banks uses myth and fairy tale to construct her *own* (rather than as imagined by a production team) onstage persona and identity as a mermaid. To do so, I will primarily focus on various elements of *Fantasea* and argue that Banks is using her Medusan Ice Princess gaze and casting it upon myth and fairy tale to create her own hybrid and unique mermaid-esque identity.¹²⁶

Greco-Roman mythology is largely found on the *Fantasea* mixtape in tracks two and three that are called ‘Neptune’ and ‘Atlantis’ respectively. Neptune is the Roman name for the god of the sea, known as Poseidon in Greek religion, and Atlantis refers to the lost underwater island mentioned by Plato in *Timaeus* (c. 360 BCE, 24e - 25d) and in *Critias* (c. 360 BCE, 108e-109c and 113c-121c). Plato describes the fictional Atlantis as an island populated by demigods born from Poseidon and a mortal woman. Ultimately, the Atlanteans fell out of favour with the gods, who sunk their island to the bottom of the sea. In the song ‘Atlantis’, Banks refers to herself as ‘Jupiter Queen’, suggesting that she is either the consort of Jupiter, the main god of the Roman pantheon and thus can be read as the goddess Juno, or she is equating herself with this male god’s power and status. ‘Atlantis’ was released as a single (2012), and in the accompanying video (directed by Fafi) Banks is shown in front of a green screen while various sea-related images are projected behind her, including Greek columns and a statue of Poseidon/Neptune with laser beams shooting from his eyes while holding his trident (at around twenty-two seconds). I suggest that Banks’ use of classical mythology is more than simply to create clever imagery. I argue below that what Banks is showing is that if you do not see yourself reflected in certain narratives, then insert yourself.

¹²⁵ In fact, she verbally attacks anyone who uses mermaid imagery, claiming that this is unique to her performance. For example, in 2018, Banks claimed that rapper Nicki Minaj stole her mermaid idea. She said that Minaj’s hips and bottom were too big to wear the tail outfit (*Twitter*, 2018 – tweet now deleted, taken from Aniftos 2018).

¹²⁶ Azealia Banks even refers to herself on her *Instagram* bio as ‘Sea Queen’ (@azealiabanks 2020).

However, this is not simply a regurgitation of these myths, this is creating something *new*. I suggest that the same can be said for the way Banks uses the mermaid, which she consistently aligns herself with throughout *Fantasea*, and connects it with modern fairy tale.

Mermaids are also linked to the ancient Greek world for they are often associated with the Sirens, the half bird women who lured men to their deaths. As Tara E. Pedersen says, by the Renaissance, the word ‘Siren’ became interchangeable with ‘mermaid’ (Pedersen 2015, 12). The development of the mermaid is complex, though they are usually depicted as hybrid humans with the lower body of a fish.¹²⁷ Banks seems to largely draw inspiration for her mermaid from Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* (1989 adapted from of Hans Christian Andersen 1837).¹²⁸ The front cover of the mixtape showed Banks as a Black cartoon mermaid very similar in style to Disney’s Ariel, though rather than Ariel’s red hair, this cartoon version of Banks is shown with turquoise hair, and a giant eye (an all-seeing ‘third eye’?) in the sky looks down on her, casting an illuminating glow as if it were the moon, or even a stage light. Although mermaids are found throughout various cultures, the suggestion that Banks was drawing on Disney’s mermaid becomes further evident in track ‘Fierce’: ‘Mermaid coming on the shore, Take the prince crown and coin’, a play on Ariel who becomes human and marries the prince, Eric.

Azealia Banks’ use of the mermaid extends beyond *Fantasea* and becomes part of her onstage persona. The *Mermaid Ball* tour promoted the mixtape and took the form of a concert tour with added onstage guests and entertainment. During the London date (thirteenth of October 2012) held at the city’s *Sea Life Centre*, Azealia Banks dressed as a mermaid with long red hair, evoking Ariel, and stood with a trident. The trident is often the accessory of Poseidon/Neptune, but it also plays a pivotal role in Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*, when the evil Ursula steals it and uses its power. During the ball in New York (third of June 2012), Banks held a fancy dress and voguing competition where fans dressed up as mermaids to win one thousand dollars. To assemble all the competitors, MC Jack Mizrahi shouted ‘I need all my mermaids on stage. But only Ariel’s; we don’t need no Ursula’s’ (qtd. in Trammell 2012). There seemed to be this constant connection to Ariel being made and fans also read Azealia as Ariel, for example, *YouTube* user *Le Petit Merboy* created a lyric video for the song *Fantasea* with a picture of Disney’s Ariel as the main picture (Le Petit Merboy 2015). When

¹²⁷ In some cultures, mermaids are not depicted with the lower body of a fish. For example, the mermaid-like Melusine from European folklore often has the lower body of a snake.

¹²⁸ Ariel lives in an underwater city called *Atlantica*, seemingly influenced by the mythical Greek underwater island.

a public figure dresses as a mermaid, they are immediately read as Ariel, and it shows how pervasive Disney princesses are in the Western conscience. This was also shown in 2019 when Disney stated that the Black actress Halle Bailey would be playing Ariel in the upcoming live action version of *The Little Mermaid*. The hashtag #notmyAriel began trending on *Twitter*. Having a Black woman play this role was deemed controversial, with many *Twitter* users echoing the following sentiment: ‘RESIGN!!!!...All generations raised with WHITE Ariel with Red hair!!! Leave classic Disney movies in peace!’ (qtd. in Paquette 2019).¹²⁹ Yet, as many retorted, mermaids are not simply found in European cultures, nor are they only white-skinned. For example, there are African water deities that can be depicted as mermaids, such as Mami Wata and Yemaya.

It is interesting that Banks originally stated that her use of mermaid imagery did not ‘mean anything’ (‘Azealia Banks Explains Whole Mermaid Deal’ 2012), yet, after the *Mermaid Ball* tour, Banks admitted on *Twitter* that *Fantasea* and her use of the mermaid were in homage to Yemaya (*Twitter* account has since been deactivated, found in Tinsley 2018, 160). Yemaya is an African Caribbean water deity from the Santería religion (originating in Cuba) which developed from the Yoruba religion of West Africa. As with many African deities, because Africans were enslaved and taken to the Americas, their religions also developed and amalgamated with other cultures. In the Santería tradition, for example, the African tradition blended with Roman Catholic aspects. Yemaya is believed to be the mother of all the orishas, and she is frequently connected with Mami Wata, a pan-African water deity. Note that Yemaya is known as Yemoja in the Yoruba tradition, and this therefore connects Banks’ use of the orisha with Beyoncé above. It points to how the worship, or embodiment, of these African goddesses can be a form of inspiration and

¹²⁹ The backlash is similar to a debate in 2017 when an educational cartoon on the *BBC* showed a Black Roman soldier in Roman Britain. While many claimed this was political correctness gone too far and that the *BBC* was ‘rewriting history’, there is evidence that Roman Britain would indeed have been diverse (‘How Ethnically Diverse was Roman Britain?’ 2017). Another example is when Black actors David Gyasi and Hakeem Kae-Kazim were cast as Achilles and Zeus in the television series *Troy: Fall of a City* (2018) and a number of viewers voiced their disappointment in the casting choices because of the actors’ race. Again, there is the assumption that the Greek and Roman worlds were not diverse, which is inaccurate.

Also, a Black mermaid caused controversy in August 2020 when *Tesco* sold t-shirts that depicted a Black mermaid with the slogan ‘that’s not my mermaid’. The slogan was taken from a children’s book *That’s Not My Mermaid* (Fiona Watt 2019), in which a child is trying to find a mermaid. When the Black mermaid is shown, it is said that she is not the right match, because her hair is too ‘fluffy’. Problematically, the book also has ‘fluffy’ hair for the reader to touch (this is part of the Usborne ‘touch-feely’ series). Although the book had good intentions, it is clear that this is an issue on several accounts. As has been discussed, describing Black people’s hair as ‘wool’ was a way of dehumanizing enslaved Africans, and ‘fluffy’ seems to be an extension of this. Also, non-Black people touching Black women’s hair without permission is an ongoing issue. Further, without context, and without realising the t-shirt was based on a book, the motif ‘that’s not my mermaid’ seems to perpetuate the idea that a Black figure as a mermaid, a fairy tale character, is not quite the right fit.

empowerment for these Black artists, while also connecting these Black pop stars to other Black women as part of a matriarchal line. Both Mami Wata and Yemaya are frequently portrayed as mermaids, with big hair and holding a mirror and a comb as well as being connected with the maternal.¹³⁰ It is likely that, when ships arrived in Africa in the 1500s with Sirens/mermaids on the prow that ‘over time, the European mermaid legend blended with local stories, and more and more Africans came to portray their water spirits as half-woman, half-fish’ (‘Becoming Mermaids’ n.d.). These African water spirits that have come to be presented as mermaids indicate a connection with slavery, colonialism, and *adapting*.

In a post uploaded on *Instagram* in August 2019, Banks expanded on the way Yemaya guided her during the creation of *Fantasea* and that the goddess led her to ‘Seapunk’ and ‘a group named Drexciya’, who also inspired her sequel to *Fantasea* – *Fantasea 2.0* (which has yet to be released) (@azealiabanks 2019). ‘Seapunk’ is a subculture that was created on the site *Tumblr* in 2011 (originally as a meme). It primarily centres around aquatic inspired fashion with nods to electronic music and 90s popular culture. The reference that Banks makes to Drexciya, however, is most interesting. Drexciya were an electronic music duo from Detroit who, through their music, created an Afrofuturistic myth. Afrofuturism was coined by Mark Dery in ‘Black to the Future’ (1994) and relates to the use of the past and science fiction to create futuristic alternate realities for African Americans that escape ‘white power’. As African history has been, essentially, stolen from African people ‘Afrofuturists are intrigued by Africa’s ancient wisdom’, thus ‘Afrofuturist artists site Egyptian deities, the Dogon myths, water myths, and Yoruba orishas more than any other African cosmology in their art, music, and literature’ (Womack 2013, 80).¹³¹ Drexciya drew from Mami Wata to create their own mythology, one which begins with pregnant African slaves being thrown overboard by colonisers on their way to Africa for being too disruptive (Womack 2013, 87).¹³² However, their unborn babies learned to breathe underwater and created a ‘Bubble Metropolis’.¹³³ Although slightly different to the legendary lost island of Atlantis, the

¹³⁰ The hair, mirror, and comb seem to point to Aphrodite.

¹³¹ The Dogon people of West Africa. In their religion and mythology, they too have water spirits.

¹³² This was mentioned in the liner notes to their compilation album *The Quest* (1997) but was a theme that ran throughout their work. In the end, the Drexciyans of the bubble Metropolis (who originally came from outer space) returned home to their planet, and thus Drexciya included outer space themes as well as underwater themes in their music. The creation of this fictional underwater people was inspired by African water spirits such as Mami Wata but also the ‘amphibious, fish-like Nommo hybrids from outer space worshipped by the Dogon of Mali’ (Gaskins 2016, 75).

¹³³ Note here the connection with Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* and futuristic cities. African American artist Janelle Monae also uses *Metropolis* as part of her music, and which can similarly be read as Afrofuturistic.

Drexciyan myth combines ‘the ocean mythologies of Atlantis and ancestral spirits in Africa’ (Gaskins 2016, 75). As Nettrice R. Gaskins says, this world that Drexciya have created is:

...what post-colonial scholar and theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) would refer to as a third space of enunciation or expression in which cultural systems are constructed (which includes embedded myths, the construction of culture and the invention of tradition). Bhabha’s Third Space theory explains the uniqueness of people or contexts as hybrids.

Gaskins 2016, 75.

This notion of hybridity, of bringing together various myths and narratives from the past to invent the future, is similarly found in Banks’ work. Further, Banks may have been inspired by Drexciya to create her rap ‘Atlantis’ and her accompanying music video, which combines Greco-Roman mythology with futuristic elements (such as the Poseidon/Neptune statue with laser beam eyes described above) and can thus be read as ‘Afrofuturistic’. It also suggests that the ‘Ice Princess’ video can also be read as ‘Afrofuturistic’, for it is set in the future and combines various mythologies with European fairy tale and a robotic army. While the video can be read as a commentary on ‘whitewashing’, the whiteness of the video is usurped by the diversity of colour at the end of the video, perhaps inspired by Afrofuturism to create a more inclusive future that draws from the past.

By combining African traditions with European fairy tales and ancient Greco-Roman mythology to create her mermaid, Banks is creating a hybrid character and a third *narrative*; one that is unique to her Black experience. Through her image, I also argue she is giving herself a voice, in contrast to Disney’s *Little Mermaid* who sacrifices her own voice in a bid to make the prince Eric fall in love with her.¹³⁴ Banks is Cixous’ embodiment of the woman who looks past mirror reflections created by others, akin to the ones reflected in Perseus’ shield, and creates and writes for herself. It is the idea of not taking these narratives as truths but applying an oppositional gaze to question their authority. In relation to mirrors, while outlining her oppositional gaze theory, hooks quotes Stuart Hall (1989) who argued that

¹³⁴ Relating to the voice and in an interesting link, Azealia Banks accused Lady Gaga of copying her mermaid imagery when Gaga became a sea-shelled covered Aphrodite. While promoting her *Artpop* album, Lady Gaga decapitated the head off an Ariel soft toy while on stage at the *iTunes* festival. In an interview with *Galore*, Azealia Banks was asked ‘If you’re Ariel of the lil’ mermaid who is the Ursula aka the sea witch of the rap game?’ to which she replied: ‘Gaga. She gets on my nerves and wants to steal my voice for sure. She’s too rich to be that lame’ (qtd. in McCormack 2013). Note that stealing her voice refers to Ursula who steals Ariel’s, but also Azealia Banks was meant to feature on the *Artpop* album but the song they collaborated on did not make the final cut. The connection with Banks being an Ariel who is losing her voice draws parallels elsewhere in Banks’ world where, as a vocal and controversial Black woman, is often reduced to the stereotype of an ‘angry Black woman’ and is dismissed as ‘crazy’ (‘Nick Cannon and Vlad Discuss Azealia Banks: You’ll Never Beat Crazy’ 2018).

Black people should view film ‘not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enables us to discover who we are’ (Hall quoted in hooks 1992, 131). This, I argue, is exactly what Banks does by creating her own narrative, and the mirror is an apt way to frame this as it is intrinsic to Mami Wata worship.¹³⁵ It is reasonable to assume that Banks also takes inspiration from Mami Wata to construct her mermaid persona, for Mami Wata inspired Drexciya, and Mami Wata is often used as a blanket to include other African water deities such as Yemaya. As Lilith Dorsey says, ‘Mami Wata is the sea water of Yemaya, but present in all other waters as well’ (2020, 85). The mirror points to the beauty of Mami Wata who, like Yemaya, enjoys gazing at her own appearance. Therefore, Banks by looking to African traditions, can find images of Black beauty. Instead of looking at European fairy tales, and even how the classical myths have been used, Banks is applying an oppositional gaze to look *beyond* these images of white female beauty to find beautiful fantastical Black figures. Mami Wata’s mirror surface also evokes ‘the surface of the water’ and symbolises the boundary that separates the watery domain of Mami Wata from land (Drewal 1988, 162). Further, ‘the mirror allows not only passage between water and land, but between the present and the future’ and as one devotee said, she could see the future in her Mami Wata mirror (Drewal 1988, 165). Scholar Henry John Drewal also reads the mirror as a metaphor, for worshippers of Mami Wata during rituals ‘impersonate’ Mami Wata by re-creating ‘her attire’ and ‘construct her watery world in their sacred spaces’ (Drewal 1988, 165). However, as various incarnations of Mami Wata are influenced by different cultures and lived experiences of her devotees ‘this mirroring is not simple reproduction; it is a creative interpretation and re-presentation’ (Drewal 1988, 165).

Banks’ creation of her identity can similarly be read, not as an exact reproduction, but as a remythologizing that inspires change in herself *and* her fans. Black feminist Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley reads Banks’ use of the mermaid and Yemaya as the idea of looking back to Africa ‘not to retraumatise, but to recover tools for collective healing: to move us forward’, just as arguably Beyoncé does, discussed above (2018, 162). This is exactly what Azealia is doing by redefining the mermaid in Western culture, challenging its alignment with whiteness as well as narratives excluding Black figures. As one *Twitter* user states:

¹³⁵ As mentioned, Yemaya is also shown with a mirror but there is very little literature on how the mirror is also used by her devotees.

Halle Bailey is going to be Ariel in the live-action Little Mermaid. I repeat, we are getting a Disney mermaid princess that has thick, nappy hair and I'm crying. Azealia Bank's [sic] impact!
@MiracleBoy1000 (2019).

Tinsley thus reads Banks as the Haitian Lasirenn, counterpart to Yemaya (2018, 139) and refers to her as a 'Vodoun Ariel' (2018, 140), using Disney's mermaid here to highlight that Banks is someone who builds on Africa's past to create something new. Tinsley links this with the hair. European mermaids were known for their hair, and thus so were the African water deities. This leads Tinsley to argue that, rather than Banks covering an element of her Blackness by wearing a weave as a type of subliminally enforced assimilation, that wearing a weave can be about self-definition and *choice*:

If hair is memory – the transgenerational inheritance that constantly grows with us – then, well, being a black mermaid is all about rocking a weave. You start with what your parents gave you, your natural hair...But from there, you sew in the colors, lengths, and textures that *you* invent, that tell the world who you're choosing to be. Tinsley 2018, 162.

It is the idea of building on what has been given to you, your heritage, and using that to construct your image, this modern African American woman. The same can be said for Banks' other use of fairy tale: Rapunzel. Banks calls herself Yung Rapunxel and describes her as her alter ego. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, Banks described the first time she wore a weave which made her feel like 'the sexiest sh-t ever' and which led to her calling herself Yung Rapunxel (qtd. in Nika 2012). Since then, Banks has written a rap that was released under the same name, and she continues to wear her signature long weaves. Although Black women are often criticised for wearing weaves (see previous chapter), Banks is redefining a European fairy tale by inserting a Black woman and the weave, a hair piece that is particularly aligned with Black women's appearance, into this story to create a Black princess. Further, weaves also protect her natural hair underneath, her African roots. Banks is choosing who she wants to be and what makes her feel good. I am reminded here of Lynda Cowell's piece entitled 'The afro isn't the only route to self-love and empowerment' uploaded onto the site *gal-dem*, where she says that empowerment does not have to start with hair: 'It might just as easily start with a weave, a pile of books and an interest in something much more powerful than a hairdo' (Cowell 2017).

Conclusion

By using the Ice Princess video and the hybridity of its main character, this chapter has suggested a new way of using Medusa in relation to Black women's identity that goes beyond the hair. The reappropriation of the Gorgon's gaze which is combined with the Snow Queen's ability to turn everything to ice and to 'whiten', encourages a racial reading, one which I have interpreted as an 'oppositional gaze'. I have read it as a critique of the whitewashing of mythical narratives and fairy tales and how, through these narratives not reflecting images of Black women, this has led Black artists to create their *own* stories. Consistent throughout the chapter is the idea of looking to the past to challenge current perceptions and change the future, and Banks is unique in that, like her character Ice Princess, she uses Greco-Roman myth and European fairy tale to create her own image as a Black mermaid. Here, I have suggested that Banks draws on these narratives and combines them with African traditions to reflect her identity. It is one that links her to a history that has been appropriated to disparage Black people, and one to which many African Americans believe they have been denied access. This clearly shows that Banks has agency over her image rather than being reduced to her controversial behaviour and her use of skin whitening creams. What it shows is the multifaceted self of a Black woman in America trying to make sense of her identity and the racial prejudices she faces. It challenges the portrayal of Black women (and men) in popular culture that often reduces Black people to a homogeneous group, reduced to stereotypes and tokenism, without room for nuance.

This chapter along with previous reveals why Black artists are drawn to Medusa, but also to ancient mythology in general. Framing my analysis by using the Gorgon, it can be deduced that Black women have had to repeatedly contend with seeing themselves through the eyes of others, and this can range from a white Perseus viewing a Black Medusa as a monster (Smartt), or repeatedly being bombarded with images in popular culture that do not reflect one's own Black identity. However, unlike Mulvey's reductive theory, Black women can have agency and subversively recreate narratives from their own perspective with their own powerful gaze and image. Therefore, rather than being the beheaded and silenced Medusa or Ariel, Banks can be heard via her image.

Following Rihanna and Azealia Banks' versions of Medusa, in the subsequent chapters, I will argue that Medusa can be used as a lens through which to analyse female pop stars who do not explicitly become the Gorgon but who are read as such. I contend that by

further exploring these pop stars in relation to the gaze and the monstrous, the ways these women are seducing the gaze of their diverse audience by constructing and having agency over their image can be deduced.

Chapter 3

Medusa's Gaze: Madonna as Spectacle

While the previous chapters have analysed pop stars who consciously become Medusa, this chapter will consider a pop star who has been interpreted as the Gorgon. Madonna as Medusa was initially suggested by comedienne Julie Brown when Brown produced, directed, and starred in a mockumentary called *Medusa: Dare to be Truthful* (1992), a film that parodied Madonna's documentary *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (1991).¹³⁶ *Truth or Dare* documented Madonna's *Blond Ambition World Tour* (1990), and 'became the highest grossing "documentary" in history' (Guilbert 2002, 29).¹³⁷ The film showed Madonna backstage in black and white footage, while her onstage performances were shown in colour as part of an 'access all areas' view of the pop star. Throughout the documentary, there is the sense that Madonna is an 'act' for the camera. For example, in a scene with then boyfriend actor Warren Beatty, Beatty says: 'She doesn't want to live off-camera, much less talk. There's nothing to say off-camera. Why would you say something if it's off-camera?' (*Truth or Dare* 1991). It is Madonna's incessant need to be filmed, to be a spectacle and the object of the gaze, that Brown parodies. Playing the role of Medusa, i.e., *Madonna*, Brown's character hilariously pokes fun at a pop star who will do anything for attention (including electrocuting herself onstage because it creates a more exhilarating dance sequence!). The Medusa character in this film repeatedly uses sex to garner attention, and it plays on Madonna's employment of shock tactics and sex to sell. Indeed, with the advent of *MTV* in 1981, as mentioned in the Introduction, the use of music videos became just as important as the single itself, and Madonna took full advantage of this by creating videos akin to mini films with overt displays of sexuality. Thus, as Laurie Schulze et al found in their study, while fans idolise Madonna as a 'postmodern deity', her critics view her 'grotesque' use of sex or religion in her performances, as a 'modern Medusa' (1993, 15 and 31). As Brown's Medusa is not visually monstrous or Gorgon-like (save for the short wavy blonde hair that imitated Madonna's own

¹³⁶ *Medusa: Dare to be Truthful* was co-directed by John Fortenberry.

¹³⁷ The tour comprised of fifty-seven dates and was used to promote Madonna's albums *Like a Prayer* (1989) and *I'm Breathless* (1990), the latter being the soundtrack she recorded for the film *Dick Tracy* (1990), in which Madonna played the role of Breathless Mahoney (a blonde femme fatale). The tour was divided into five themes, the first being inspired by the film *Metropolis* (1927), the second having a religious theme, then Dick Tracy, art deco, and finally an encore. Madonna also wore the infamous cone bra created by fashion designer Jean Paul Gaudier during the tour.

hairstyle and which could be read as evoking snakes), it seems that Brown read Madonna as the monstrous Medusa because of the pop star's excessive nature and need to fixate the gaze.

In the mockumentary, Brown re-writes Madonna's songs to point to how the pop star uses sex to appeal to her audience. For example, in a reworked version of Madonna's 'Express Yourself' called 'Expose Yourself', Medusa sings: 'come on girls, do you want to be a vixen? Well I'm going to tell you how and you do it like this', continuing 'if you want to get some attention, dress your body just like mine' ('Expose Yourself', Brown). Brown alludes to how Madonna manipulates her appearance to consciously become a 'vixen'. After all, in her performances and music videos, Madonna copies past film tropes of the vamp and the dumb blonde by imitating screen icons such as Marlene Dietrich and Marilyn Monroe, known for their blonde hair and sex appeal. Brown's less than flattering portrayal of Madonna as a Medusa also plays on the pop star's alleged unoriginality and her use of past icons to create her image. In another scene taken from the mockumentary, Medusa lists her 'original' ideas: 'copying Marilyn Monroe...um...grabbing my crotch' (*Medusa: Dare to be Truthful* 1992). The latter in this quotation refers to how Madonna seemingly copied her ex-boyfriend Michael Jackson's signature dance move. However, I argue that Madonna's use of past icons is not simply a direct copy but are implemented to highlight that gender is *performed*. I argue that Madonna can be read as a Medusa figure and, through an exploration of the dynamics of the Gorgon's gaze, determine how she plays to and manipulates the gaze in her music videos.

To explore Madonna's performance of gender, I shall primarily analyse three of her music videos: 'Material Girl' (1985), 'Open Your Heart' (1986), and 'Express Yourself' (1989).¹³⁸ In these videos, Madonna uses films from two post-war periods, Weimar Germany and 1950s Hollywood, to play on the feminine stereotypes of the vamp and the dumb blonde. These women embodied post-war male anxieties regarding gender roles, and they use their appearance to play with the male gaze, challenging its authority. I argue that Madonna similarly plays these roles to command the gaze while highlighting that she is an active agent in the construction of her appearance. Her manipulation of her appearance shows an awareness of how she can use her image to enhance her own status as an icon, yet she updates this for a more modern audience. While Madonna becomes the overtly sexual blonde borrowed from film, she becomes a 'construction of a construction' (Schwichtenberg 1993,

¹³⁸ These singles were also part of Madonna's *Blonde Ambition* tour setlist.

134), replicating an already performed femininity. She highlights gender as a construction even more so than her predecessors, and she slips in and out of different roles to become an amalgamation of different gendered identities. Rather than simply appealing to, or manipulating a male gaze, Madonna shows an awareness of the need to appeal to the different sets of eyes that are watching her, and thus constructs her appearance to captivate a diverse audience.

Madonna is the subject of many academic debates (also known as ‘Madonna studies’ [Milestone and Meyer 2012]), and her work can be read against the backlash towards second-wave feminism and the different rifts within feminism during the 1980s and 1990s. Second-wave feminists such as Laura Mulvey in the 1970s had argued that women’s equality would be achieved when women were no longer objectified by men and, to support her argument, reduced women and men to ‘essentialist’ categories, without reflecting on different influencing factors such as race, sexuality, and class (Schwichtenberg 1993, 131).¹³⁹ Madonna in contrast threatened to destabilise the work of second-wave feminism as a ‘postmodern “product”’ who used ‘simulation strategically in ways that challenge the stable notion of gender as the edifice of sexual difference’ (Schwichtenberg 1993, 132). Madonna incorporated symbols of the oppressed into her image and while, by doing this, she acknowledged and spoke to the various identities that constituted her audience and offered empowerment to marginalised groups (particularly her queer fan base), it was also a tactic implemented by Madonna to ensure she appealed to as wide a demographic as possible. No wonder then, that the different branches of feminism did not know how to categorise her.

In this chapter, I read Madonna through a Medusa lens to argue, contrary to Mulvey’s assertion that women onscreen are a homogeneous group that serve as passive objects for an exclusively male gaze, that Madonna actively encourages the gaze and, like the Gorgon, is a woman who *looks* and is powerful when looked *at*. As discussed in the Introductory chapter, Medusa is only able to petrify when her victim looks at her. Madonna similarly must draw the gaze of her audience towards her in order to fixate their attention and increase her star power. However, using Craig Owens’ theory of ‘the Medusa effect’ (1984), I also argue that Madonna’s performance of gender encourages her fans to *actively* engage with her image and to create their own readings. Therefore, rather than simply immobilizing the spectator’s gaze

¹³⁹ To elaborate, second-wave feminism tended to view women as a homogeneous group united under a collective identity, but this led to very little emphasis placed on the differences *between* women (Schwichtenberg 1993, 131).

by using shock tactics to garner attention, she *mobilises* the spectator. I thus read Madonna as a *semi-Medusa* who manipulates her image to orchestrate how she is gazed upon.

The Medusa Effect

For my analysis of Madonna's work, I shall begin with Craig Owens' 'the Medusa Effect' and the power of the pose. Madonna used the pose in her video for 'Vogue' (1990), which Brown parodied in *Medusa: Dare to be Truthful* as 'Vague'. 'Vogue' refers to a form of dance called 'voguing' where dancers strike poses inspired by fashion models, and it was created by queer Black and Latinx men in 1980s New York.¹⁴⁰ Madonna appropriates the dance in her music video, which is shot in black and white, and she vogues alongside statues, paintings, and her dancers, while posing as past onscreen icons such as Marlene Dietrich.¹⁴¹ For instance, at around three minutes fifty-seven into the video, Madonna wears a suit and is shown with her short, curled, peroxide blonde hair looking up into a light. This same pose was used to capture Dietrich in the film *Shanghai Express* (1932), where director Josef von Sternberg used what is called 'butterfly lighting' to highlight the actress' facial features, particularly her cheekbones, in a black and white film. Madonna has a clear affinity for the style and culture of the 1920s and 30s, as is further highlighted in the video by paintings on the floor by the art-deco artist Tamara de Lempicka (1898-1980). De Lempicka will be discussed in more depth below, but among the paintings are *Andromeda* (1929), *Femme Bleu à la Guitare* (1929), and *Nana de Herrera* (1929). Alongside Dietrich, Madonna also lists in the lyrics film stars, or notable persons, from classic Hollywood: 'Greta Garbo, and Monroe, Dietrich and DiMaggio' ('Vogue' 1990).¹⁴² By listing icons from Hollywood's past and

¹⁴⁰ Regarding Madonna and race, see bell hooks' 'Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister' (1995). Some argue that her appropriation from sub-cultural groups, for example 'voguing' from gay Black men, is more beneficial to her star image than it is for her queer or Black audience. While Madonna diversifies depictions of sex on screen, this is also a method of raising her notoriety and controversy as a pop star. Madonna, a performer worth millions, can be anything she wants but this is not true for her diverse audience. Yet, in Madonna there is escapism and a pop idol a diverse audience can identify with. Further, she is a spokeswoman for the gay community in her support for AIDs awareness.

¹⁴¹ In her use of the pose, Madonna barely moves her mouth when singing to her song. In her article, 'Athena's Armor, Medusa's Scream' (2016), Gertrud Koch refers to Madonna's limited mouth movement in her music video for 'Take a Bow' (1994) in connection with the Greek goddess Athena. After Medusa was murdered, the goddess fashioned an instrument made from reeds to imitate the sounds that the Gorgon sisters made when they realised Medusa had been killed. However, upon seeing her reflection while playing the instrument, Athena found herself looking, as well as sounding, monstrous for she had puffed out cheeks that made her look unattractive. To quote Koch: 'Athena is, in this sense, a precursor of Madonna, who – in her early music videos – had a tendency to keep her mouth closed rather than run the risk of an ugly facial gesture' (2016, 177-8). Madonna's focus on the visual in her performances rather than her singing supports my argument in this chapter of the pop star's construction of herself as a spectacle.

¹⁴² The latter on the list here being the American baseball player who famously dated Monroe.

constructing her image on said previous icons, Madonna metaphorically inaugurates herself into the Hollywood hall of fame.

It is because of Madonna's use in this video of the pose, which was parodied by Brown as 'Medusa', that the editors of *The Medusa Reader* (2003), Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, connect Madonna with Craig Owens' 'the Medusa Effect' (1984). Owens uses the Medusa myth in conjunction with the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, to suggest that the pose, like Medusa, has an apotropaic effect (the ability to deflect evil) that immobilises the viewer. By discussing Owens' work, I suggest that the 'the Medusa Effect' is useful for an analysis of how Madonna manipulates the gaze.

Owens' theory was created in response to the work of the American artist Barbara Kruger. In her work, Kruger transforms existing photographs, frequently of celebrities, into black and white images and imposes her own text over the top of the image. The pictures are ones that have been photographed in studios and thus the figure in the photograph is *posing*, and this highlights that the picture is staged (Owens 1994, 192). In one of her pieces (untitled), Kruger inserts the text 'Not Stupid Enough' on top of a picture of Marilyn Monroe (1997). The work reveals the constructed nature of the feminine stereotype of the 'dumb blonde' to which Monroe frequently played.¹⁴³ Kruger's work thus focuses on stereotypes, images that are repeatedly displayed to society with such repetition and ferocity that they are taken as truths. By taking images that have been constructed, where the subject has posed for the photograph, and widely circulated to be passively absorbed by society, she exposes them for what they are: 'an integral part of social processes of incorporation, exclusion, domination, and rule – that is, as a weapon, an instrument of power' (Owens 1994, 191). The stereotype is a threat, it is an apotrope, it is powerful, and it subordinates the spectator who passively receives it. Kruger's work interrupts this by highlighting stereotypes for what they are and thus her works 'invite us to decode the message' (Owens 1994, 195).

Owens discusses a particular untitled piece by Kruger that she created in 1982, which shows the outline of a woman sitting bent over with pins stuck into her body and the words 'we have received orders not to move' emblazoned in the middle of the image (Owens 1994, 195). The picture seems to be making a statement regarding the objectifying male gaze, yet

¹⁴³ Monroe carefully constructed her appearance by dyeing her hair peroxide blonde and changing her name from Norma Jean Dougherty to Marilyn Monroe to become a successful actress. However, she also spoke about her frustration of being typecast as a sex symbol and dumb blonde, a role she was unable to escape in Hollywood (Lipsitz 1994, 30-31).

Owens asks: ‘can we be entirely certain that this woman is the victim of a *male gaze*?’ (1994, 195). Here he turns to the myth of Medusa where the objectifying gaze is *Medusa’s*. Owens, in his reading of the myth, assumes that the narrative suggests that Medusa looks at herself in Perseus’ shield before she is killed by the hero and petrifies *herself*. Yet, as has been acknowledged, Medusa was asleep when Perseus looked at her reflection before decapitating her. However, Owens’ mis-reading and re-writing of this section of the myth does raise interesting points that he uses in conjunction with psychoanalysis.¹⁴⁴

It is the power of Medusa, and of the evil eye, to return the gaze back onto itself and to kill that is read by Owens as Medusa’s own ‘vulnerability’ and Perseus’ power when he steals Medusa’s head to be used against others (Owens 1994, 196). Owens describes the moment when Medusa looks at herself as ‘almost proto-photographic’ as it ‘seems to describe that split-second in which vision bends back upon itself to produce its own imprint’ (Owens 1994, 196). Owens uses Lacan’s Imaginary Order (as discussed in the Introduction) to read this element of the myth, where Medusa identifies with her mirror double and is ‘captured’ (Owens 1994, 197).¹⁴⁵ This act of looking at the self in a moment of ‘pseudo-identification’ is described by Lacan as a ‘suture’, a moment of first an ‘initial moment of seeing’ and then a ‘terminal moment of arrest’ (Owens 1994, 197). When Medusa looks at herself, there is the initial identification with her mirror image before her gaze is reflected back and turns her to stone.¹⁴⁶ Thus, ‘Medusa’s horror at seeing herself’ is a ‘kind of mirror stage, in which gazer and gazed-upon are locked in a dialectic of mutual reflection’ (Garber and Vickers 2013, 6). Owens thus proposes renaming the ‘suture’ ‘the Medusa Effect’ which is ‘specular ruse, imaginary identification of seer and seen, immediacy, capture, stereotype’ (Owens 1994, 198). Regarding stereotypes, as they are deemed a mirror image of society, spectators pseudo-identify with the image as passive receivers and are stunned into submission.

However, as Owens says, Lacan also gave a ‘prescription’ against the evil eye where the order of looking is reversed: first the ‘arrested gesture’ and then the ‘act of viewing which completes the gesture’ (Owens 1994, 198). This ‘prescription’ describes the act of looking at

¹⁴⁴ Other theorists who also suggest that Medusa petrifies herself include Louis Marin’s in *To Destroy Painting* (1977).

¹⁴⁵ Looking in the mirror during the Imaginary order is a rather precarious moment. In this Imaginary phase, the subject is ‘in love with an image of itself’, and as Hook notes, the myth of Narcissus warns us that if one is unable to break the fascination with the image, they will die (Hook 2006, 62). If the child does not break away from this image, it could remain in the Imaginary.

¹⁴⁶ According to Owens, Perseus is able to decapitate her before she turns herself to stone.

a picture or photograph which is already ‘captured’, it is an immobilised image that the viewer looks at (Owens 1994, 198). This explains why when one looks at a painting of Medusa, her gaze has no effect, after all, Perseus was not frozen when he looked at Medusa’s image on his shield (see Rainer Mack [2002], who discusses the production of Medusa images in the ancient world which were created to be looked *at*). However, as Owen states, what Lacan is also discussing is the act of the pose where one acts as if they are immobilised ‘*already a picture*’ (Owens 1994, 198). Therefore, to quote Owens at length:

For Lacan, then, pose has a strategic value: mimicking the immobility induced by the gaze, reflecting its power back on itself, pose forces it to surrender. Confronted with a pose, the gaze itself is immobilized, brought to a standstill (for the object does not move with the eye); a pose, then, is an apotrope. And to strike a pose is to pose a threat.
Owens 1994, 198.

As the pose simply mimics the photograph, it *tricks* the onlooker and thus the pose is also an apotrope that immobilises the gaze of the viewer. Using Lacan’s power of the pose to read Kruger’s work on stereotypes, Owens suggests that the stereotype: ‘...is an apotrope; posing as a mirror-image of social reality, its adequate, identical reflection, it is engineered to immediately immobilize the social body’ (1994, 198). However, Kruger’s work reveals the stereotype for what it is by revealing that it is staged, that it is a pose, and reflects it ‘back on itself’ thus defeating an apotrope with another apotrope (Owens 1994, 198). This enables the spectator to become an active agent who can engage with the image and create their own reading, rather than simply being a passive recipient and taking the image as truth. Thus, the spectator is mobilised (Owens 1994, 199).

This is precisely what I argue Madonna does in her work. Whereas Garber and Vickers seem to imply that Madonna embodies Owens’ ‘the Medusa Effect’ because of her use of the pose which fixates the gaze of her spectator, I suggest that Madonna reveals feminine stereotypes as constructed by *doubling*. She is performing an already performed feminine stereotype by recreating past blonde bombshells and thus, similar to the work of Kruger, *mobilises* the spectator by inviting her audience to engage with her image and create their own reading. Hence, while Madonna fixates the gaze as a spectacle, her audience are not passive receivers of her image, and thus I read her as a *semi-Medusa*. Madonna seems to encapsulate the arguments put forth by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), who argues that gender, and indeed sex, are *constructed* – there is no ‘original’. Madonna is a chameleon who uses parody and drag which can be subversive, for Butler posits that both parody and

drag are ways in which the fabrication of an ‘original’ sex, gender or sexuality is revealed (Butler 2010, 187). Therefore, rather than being a blonde bombshell, a feminine stereotype for the male gaze, I suggest her use of past films and icons elsewhere in her work opens Madonna up to several different readings. It leads to a consideration of Madonna as an active agent over her image while also instilling a sense that she can produce active agents in her fans. This would lead to a subversive reading of Madonna’s use of her image, rather than the ‘copycat’ that Brown puts forth in her parody. To explore the themes of ‘doubling stereotypes’ and active agency over women’s image, I shall consider three of Madonna’s music videos where she constructs her appearance in relation to film.

Material Girl (1985)

The first of these music videos is ‘Material Girl’ (1985, dir. Mary Lambert), where Madonna performs a parody of Marilyn Monroe’s performance of ‘Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend’ from the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953, dir. Howard Hawks). As the title of the film suggests, Monroe, who plays the role of Lorelai Lee with her dyed blonde hair, becomes a stereotype of femininity who uses her sexuality to attract a wealthy man whom she marries, not for love, but for money. It reveals femininity as a mask and suggests that Monroe’s character is not simply the ‘dumb blonde’ she first appears to be. It creates the foreground to an analysis of Madonna who similarly uses her appearance and reproduction of female stereotypes to, I argue, also manipulate the male gaze in the music video.

By first analysing the film, a comparison can be made with Madonna’s music video. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) is based on a novel written by Anita Loo in 1925 and was turned into a musical before the film adaptation. The film follows two showgirls, Lorelei Lee (Monroe) and Dorothy (Jane Russell), who are trying to find husbands. While Lorelei wants to marry for money, Dorothy wants to find love, and thus it is Lorelei who plays to the stereotype of the ‘dumb blonde’, a role Monroe repeatedly played in films during the 50s. This film speaks to capitalist and racial issues of the civil rights movement, as it shows white feminine beauty being exchanged for material goods that bring happiness (Rowe 1995, 178-9), and the use of sex to lure unsuspecting men draws comparison to the trope of the femme fatale of film noir in the 1940s and 50s.¹⁴⁷ Although incarnations of the femme fatale, such as

¹⁴⁷ Janet Staiger defines the femme fatale as a ‘category of a dangerous woman able to seduce a person. The femme fatale has more specific versions – the belle dame sans merci, the vampire, the vamp, the gold digger, the femme fatale of film noir’ (2010, 54). Madonna and her association with the vamp, who is found in film during the interwar period, will be discussed later in this chapter.

the vamp, were present in early cinema, the femme fatale of film noir reflected post-second world-war anxieties of renegotiating women's status in society.¹⁴⁸ Further, the perceived threats of communism and the atom bomb became tied to women's sexuality, and keeping women under control by returning them to the domestic sphere was a way of ensuring women were the 'guardians of morality' when America was allegedly threatened by alien ideologies and loose morals, with the latter exemplified by the launch of *Playboy* magazine in 1953 (Rowe 1995, 170). Significantly, it was Marilyn Monroe who was the first woman to adorn the front cover of *Playboy* magazine (December 1953), although the nude pictures of her inside the magazine, and which had been taken before she had found fame and when she had very little money, were published without her consent (Witter 2019). Yet, despite anxieties surrounding women's place in society, women were increasingly ebbing their way into previously male-dominated workplaces and, between 1940 and 1960, 'the number of working wives doubled' (Rowe 1995, 170). The femme fatale embodies these anxieties by using her sexuality as a weapon and subverts gender roles as the powerful woman who threatens male dominance, particularly through the *gaze*. She is problematic because she disrupts the male's role as the voyeur, for she realises her own participation in the act of looking, and thus uses her image to consciously seduce the male gaze and manipulate men (Staiger 2010, 32).

This is similarly found in the femme fatale of neo-noir of the 1980s and 1990s, such as *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Body of Evidence* (1993), with Madonna playing the role of Rebecca Carlson in the latter. While these femmes fatales also embody male anxieties regarding the subversion of gender roles, they are also the product of post-feminism and neo-liberalism. Therefore, while they embody the fear of female power, they ultimately serve to undermine the successes of feminism. These women objectify themselves to such an extreme extent to manipulate the men around them that it suggests that 'sexism is obsolete' and women are free agents to self-objectify ('subjectification') (Lindop 2015, 51). Unlike the femmes fatales of the 1950s, where directors and producers had to be weary with the use of sex, or loose morals, due to the 'Hays Code', that gave strict regulations on what could and could not be shown in films, the femmes fatales of neo-noir can be explicit as they like. In contrast to the femmes fatales of noir, they are also highly successful career women, and this enforces the combination of the 'successful career women with the disintegration of moral order' (Lindop 2015, 54), while also showing homosexuality in negative terms to 'reestablish

¹⁴⁸ Additionally, women had used sex as a weapon during the war in order to extract secrets from the opposing side which also led to anxieties regarding female sexuality.

gender power structures' (Lindop 2015, 48). Essentially, these films reflect the desire to return women to traditional gender roles. This is therefore different from what I argue Madonna is doing within her music videos but highlights the way the femme fatale has been appropriated to reflect different periods and gendered concerns. This is also not to say that there are not subversive elements within the femme fatale of neo-noir. As Katherine Farrimond says, the femme fatale 'may well signify male anxiety, backlash and misogyny, but she equally offers female agency, a complex account of women's challenges within patriarchal culture and sexuality that is pleasurable because it is unapologetically excessive' (2018, 11). Also note that Julie Brown parodies the femme fatale of neo-noir in *Medusa: Dare to be Truthful*. In a scene referencing Catherine Tramell's (Sharon Stone) 'money shot' in *Basic Instinct*, Medusa shows her 'muffin' to two police officers, manipulating them into not sending her to prison for crude acts onstage (*Medusa: Dare to be Truthful* 1992). It mimics an actual scene from *Truth or Dare*, where Madonna was nearly arrested in Toronto for simulating masturbation onstage. For a reading of Trammell as a Freudian Medusa in this scene, see Arlene Kramer Richards' 'Woman as Medusa in Basic Instinct' 1998.

Returning to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, this film reflects the anxieties embodied by the femme fatale of 50s noir, and as Richard Brody for *The New Yorker* says: 'The setup could as easily spark a film noir as a musical comedy; the flamboyant use of color, mainly fiery reds and sumptuous purples, masks the potential for blackmail and betrayal' (Brody 2010). Thus, as the film is a romantic comedy, Monroe's character can be read, not as the femme fatale of film noir, but as Kathleen Rowe's (1995) 'unruly woman'. For her theory, Rowe uses Medusa to argue, contrary to Laura Mulvey's argument, that woman as a spectacle is not necessarily a weakness. To outline her theory, Rowe uses H el ene Cixous' interpretation of Medusa. As discussed in the Introductory chapter, Cixous suggests that Medusa is depicted as a monster because she is repeatedly viewed through a male lens, where male fears of the female body are projected onto her. If women were to directly look at Medusa, they would find that the Gorgon is neither petrifying nor ugly but 'beautiful and laughing' (Cixous 1976, 885). Film theorist B. Ruby Rich used Cixous to put forth her argument of 'Medusan' film and argues for the subversive use of humour for women's representation on film (Rich 1985, 353). Rowe has taken this to construct her own argument of the unruly woman and the rebellious potential of laughter, arguing that women operating within the realms of comedy can construct themselves as excessive figures through parody and masquerade.

As a spectacle, women can control how they are viewed, and thus the unruly woman is a rule-breaker ‘built on transgression and inversion, disguise and masquerade, sexual reversals, the deflation of ideals, and the levelling of hierarchies’ (Rowe 1995, 9). Rowe suggests that the unruly woman is essentially ‘both beauty and monstrosity’ (1995, 11) and thus Medusa is an unruly woman because she is a spectacle that laughs. Medusa can either draw the gaze to her by her beauty, or, in the cases of early ancient depictions of the Gorgon, as a bloated face with tongue sticking out and with a beard (see fig. 0.1). Medusa’s petrifying power only worked when she was looked at and, although she primarily petrified men, she could not really control who she targeted. On the contrary, Rowe’s unruly woman can almost control whom she fixates by adopting masquerade accordingly, and this offers a connection with Banks’ Medusa in the previous chapter as a Gorgon with significantly more agency than the mythical version. Thus, as the unruly woman can use her image to knowingly play to certain gazes, her threat is not literal petrification but one where, as a spectacle, viewers will find it difficult to tear their eyes away from her. Comedy can thus be used as a radical tool by women, for the unruly woman shows how visibility can be a source of power, as women ‘can produce and make spectacles of themselves for themselves’ (Rowe 1995, 11).

Monroe’s character Lorelei is an unruly woman because she humorously uses her femininity, with her blonde hair and glamorous appearance, as a masquerade to seduce and manipulate the men around her. However, Rowe argues that Monroe’s performance of the unruly woman differs from that of her predecessors in 1930s comedy, such as Mae West, who are clearly aware of how they use their sexuality to control men. Rather, Lorelei/Monroe:

reveals only gradually – and ambiguously – that she is really the *subject* of a joke on all men who are vulnerable to their own foolishness and lust, and it is never entirely clear how much her performance of the dumb blonde actually is a masquerade.
Rowe 1995, 179.

It is during a conversation with her future father-in-law that Lorelei ‘exposes the tropes of femininity’: ‘Say, they told me you were stupid, but you don’t sound stupid to me’, says Mr. Edmunds, to which Lorelei replies: ‘I can be smart when it’s important, but most men don’t like it’ (quoted in Rowe 1995, 181). Monroe’s character must retain some level of ambiguity regarding her appeal to men as ‘too much self-awareness makes her use of power too cynical; too little makes her a victim, the butt of the joke’ (Rowe 1995, 181). In the final scenes, it is Dorothy (Russell) who adopts a blonde wig to trick the men in a courtroom into believing she

is Lorelei. The scene highlights how the ‘dumb blonde’ can be *transferred* to appeal to, and thus manipulate, the male gaze (Rowe 1995, 182).

Woman as an object of the male gaze here is not a passive spectacle, but consciously constructs herself to be objectified. Further, the men she manipulates are shown to be weak, and this gives the unruly woman an element of power. Madonna’s imitation of Lorelei updates this unruly woman for a 1980s audience. Although directed by Lambert, the video reflects both the director’s and Madonna’s fascination with Monroe: ‘I have always been extremely interested in Marilyn Monroe – her life and persona. Madonna and I shared that fascination’ (Lambert qtd. in Weingarten et al 2015). The music video begins with Madonna as a film star being watched onscreen by a rich producer and his pitch man. Madonna plays the role of a movie star and performs Lorelei/Monroe’s sequence to ‘Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend’ while singing her own song ‘Material Girl’. Although Madonna is shown mimicking Monroe’s character while being gazed upon adoringly by male dancers in suits who lavish her with jewellery, there is a distinct difference with the film. In Monroe’s performance, she is joined onscreen by other women in ball gowns who dance around her while other performers become *living objects* as various parts of the set decoration, such as a circle of women who form a chandelier. Rowe reads this as women’s objectification allowing them to enter elite spaces or high society, signified in the sequence by men wearing tuxedos and carrying silverware as well as Lorelei’s pseudo-operatic voice at the beginning of the song (Rowe 1995, 181). In Madonna’s version, however, the pop star is the only woman onscreen and the sole object of the male’s gaze.

Madonna captivates the producer who ostensibly wants her as a lover and for an upcoming role in one of his films, and thus he begins to pursue her by secretly watching her. As he spies on her in her dressing room, he overhears Madonna speaking to a friend on the phone. She tosses a necklace aside while saying that she is unimpressed with expensive gifts from men, giving the appearance that Madonna is not a ‘material girl’ after all. The producer subsequently dupes Madonna into a relationship by presenting himself as a penniless romantic; however, rather than the producer manipulating Madonna, the parody of Monroe’s Lorelei suggests that *Madonna* is the manipulator. She is a spectacle onscreen as a film star who wears a mask of excess femininity to attract the male gaze and then gradually manipulates the producer into believing she is not the material girl the song speaks of. In the end, Madonna has accomplished her goal of winning the heart of the boy with, as the lyrics say, ‘the cold hard cash’ (‘Material Girl’ 1985). Further, she can use the producer, not simply

for his money, but to progress her career as an actress. Therefore, although Monroe and Madonna can both be read as subversive in their performances, Madonna's revelation of gender as construction is taken to the extreme. While Lorelei (and indeed Monroe, who was plagued by reports of being vulnerable and manipulated by those around her) ambiguously uses her 'dumb blonde' persona, Madonna appears much more calculating.¹⁴⁹ 'Material Girl' can be read as Madonna basing her appearance on Monroe, not to simply win a wealthy husband, but to further her career, and this draws parallels with real life. The same year 'Material Girl' was released, Madonna performed a series of concerts at New York's *Radio City Music Hall* as part of her 'The Virgin' tour. In unison, *Macy's* department store fashioned a 'Madonnaland' section where fans could buy Madonna-esque clothes and jewellery to emulate their favourite star and there was also a Madonna look-alike competition (Lewis 1990, 100).¹⁵⁰ Madonna relies on her star image for success in both the video and real life, and she knows how to use it well. As David Tetzlaff says in his analysis of the video, what Madonna shows is: 'make of thyself a spectacle and ye shall be rewarded' (1993, 247).

Tetzlaff also proposes that 'Material Girl' offers a metatextual reading. During the mid-1980s there was a shift, with pressure on the middle and upper-class woman to enter the workplace to continue living their, and their family's, desired lifestyles. Tetzlaff posits that Madonna's 'Material Girl' showed how a woman could use her overtly feminine and sexual image as a mode for independence and power, albeit through a man, and therefore offers a class reading. Whereas bourgeois women tend to be aligned with the virgin, the 'good' woman who waits until marriage, women from lower classes are more typically aligned with the whore or a woman who is completely dependent on men for money, much like Monroe's character Lorelei (Tetzlaff 1993, 249-50). Madonna's metatext levels the virgin/whore dichotomy by showing how women can further themselves by using sex without actually entering 'whoredom' (Tetzlaff 1993, 251). It is about women's place in a capitalist system and negotiating their position. As Tetzlaff states, 'Becoming a sex object is still the prescribed mode of behaviour' but 'it promises a route to independence, upward mobility, an escape from powerlessness' (1993, 252). While it may not have appealed to some second-wave feminists, Madonna's 'Boy Toy' consciously offers multiple readings. There is a reading available that appeals to postmodern feminists, and it *still* appeals to 'patriarchal terms' (Tetzlaff 1993, 252). It thus acknowledges that: 'The patriarchal presence in both

¹⁴⁹ As Georges-Claude Guilbert says: 'Marilyn didn't control much, Madonna controls everything' (2002, 142).

¹⁵⁰ Further, in 2010, Madonna re-articulated the phrase 'Material Girl' as the name for her clothing and beauty company which she launched with her daughter, Lourdes.

media production and consumption is strong enough that the presentation of a purely female-addressed set of codes is not going to make anyone an international star' (Tetzlaff 1993, 252).

Therefore, even though Madonna is the object of an exclusively male gaze in the video, the overall appeal is to a diverse audience. Using Craig Owens' 'the Medusa Effect', I suggest that Madonna subversively mimics Monroe's performance, to reveal that femininity is a *construction*. She thus does not prioritise one reading over another but plays to and reveals stereotypes to encourage her audience to engage with, and deconstruct, the video. By broadening her appeal, Madonna ensures her success as a commodity.

Open Your Heart (1986)

The 'Material Girl' narrative shows Madonna onscreen consciously objectifying herself to appeal to the male gaze of the producer for her own economic gain. Madonna in 'Open Your Heart' plays a similar role, but as a strip-artist who performs to a straight and queer audience, she highlights *even further* that it is not just a male gaze that is at work with the spectacle. In the opening scene for 'Open Your Heart' (1986, dir. by Jean-Baptiste Mondino), the camera sweeps across a giant painting of a naked woman who adorns the front of a peep show theatre. The painting is the artist Tamara de Lempicka's *Andromeda* (1929), who is flanked on either side by a duplicated image of another nude female piece by de Lempicka titled *La Belle Rafaela* (1927). As first mentioned in relation to 'Vogue' (above), this is not the only time this artist's work is found in Madonna's music videos. Madonna herself is a fan and refers to her personal collection of de Lempicka's works as a 'Lempicka museum' (Madonna to *Vanity Fair*, 1990, qtd. in *Artnet* 2015). De Lempicka's paintings reflect the changing style and culture of post-war Europe in the 1920s and 30s, when women were beginning to enjoy a certain level of emancipation that came with the new 'Jazz age' that was marked by new fashions that challenged traditional gendered forms of dressing and hairstyling in the style of 'flappers'. De Lempicka embodied the essence of the liberal 'new woman' of Weimar Germany (1919-1933), exemplified by the German magazine *Die Dame* which included de Lempicka's self-portrait *Tamara in the Green Bugatti* or *AutoPortrait* (1925) on their cover. Further, there was also a certain level of sexual liberation during the period, with women frequenting nightclubs and, particularly in Weimar Berlin, when gay and lesbian clubs became slightly more prominent (as exemplified by Ruth Margarete Roellig's *Berlin's Lesbische Frauen* [1928] which provided a guide to Berlin's lesbian clubs).

De Lempicka herself was bisexual, and she frequently painted her female lovers nude, including *La Belle Rafaela* which was modelled on her lover Rafaela Fono. In doing so, de Lempicka challenged the idea that nude women were simply for a male's gaze ('Tamara de Lempicka' n.d.). Madonna's inclusion of de Lempicka's work in this video highlights that Madonna, who takes the role of the stripper, is not simply appealing to a male gaze but a range of straight and queer identities. De Lempicka's three painted women outside the theatre are all nude, and *Andromeda*, in the middle, has lightbulbs that shine from her nipples which attract the viewer to the naked female body. Andromeda is the name of the virginal maiden whom Perseus rescues after he has slain Medusa. Here, it evokes the juxtaposition between virgin and whore seen as separate in patriarchal thought. Again, as she arguably does in 'Material Girl', Madonna levels this dichotomy by using the virginal naked body of Andromeda to entice an audience to witness her strip.

As Madonna enters the peep show theatre as the performer, she sits on a chair wearing a coned brassiere with tassels and a black wig. Using the chair as a prop, she performs a seductive dance which evokes that of Sally Bowles, played by Liza Minnelli, in the film *Cabaret* (1972).¹⁵¹ The film is set in Weimar Germany, and portrays the ensuing rise of the Nazis that would soon put an end to the more liberal era. Bowles is a cabaret performer who enjoys affairs with men, while Brian, one of the main male characters, is bisexual. Taken together with de Lempicka's art, Madonna is appropriating the art and culture of the interwar period. This continues when Madonna takes off the black wig to reveal her peroxide blonde hair underneath (again, that she wears a wig and dyes her hair serves to enhance performative femininity). After she has discarded the wig, Madonna leans back on the chair and recreates the same pose found on her album cover for *True Blue* (1986 and shot by Herb Ritts). It is this self-awareness of Madonna that led director Mondino to say: '...she makes the picture, you know...She gives you the stuff. You've got to be ready to grab it.' (Mondino qtd. in Weingarten et al 2015). It points to how the pop star collaborates with the video-making process, further enhanced by Madonna, as a blonde performer, now imitating one of her personal idols – Marlene Dietrich in the film *The Blue Angel* (1930, directed by von Sternberg).

¹⁵¹ Minelli's look for the film was based on the actress Louise Brooks. Apparently, Minelli asked her father, Vincente Minnelli, about the dress code for glamorous women in 30s Berlin, and he replied that she should not base Bowles on Marlene Dietrich but rather Louise Brooks (Minnelli to Eichenbaum 2008, 163). Brooks was known for her flapper style, and her short black hair, which Minnelli imitated, transcended the usual long hair associated with femininity.

With her blonde hair revealed, Madonna performs a parody of Dietrich's character Lola, a cabaret performer in Germany and a *vamp*. The vamp of 1920s and 30s German film reflected the anxieties regarding women's changed post-war status. As mentioned, Weimar Germany was a place of more liberal attitudes; *however*, there was also inflation and unemployment and this gave rise to right-wing ideas that placed blame on Jewish people and the breakdown of gender roles and 'loose morals', eventually leading to the rise of Hitler's Nazism. It was a period fraught with contradictions and anxieties that became manifest in German expressionist films such as *Metropolis* (1927), directed by Fritz Lang and discussed below, and via the figure of the vamp. Dietrich as Lola in *The Blue Angel* embodies concerns regarding the challenges to traditional gender roles. As a cabaret performer, she seduces and marries a Professor Rath, before crippling him financially and emasculating him. At the end of the film, Rath is a broken man, and he returns to the classroom where he once taught and keels over at his desk. However, blame is not necessarily placed on Lola for Rath's demise. This is because there is a masochistic scenario at play in the film. An exploration of the use of masochism in the film is helpful for an understanding of how Madonna commands the gaze in *Open Your Heart*.

Masochism, as defined by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze in *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (1967), is distinct from sadism, for it is far more complex than simply being centred on pain and punishment.¹⁵² Deleuze argues that masochism is a regression and wish for, and fear of, symbiosis with the pre-Oedipal mother. This is a point where mother and child are united, and *before* the infant is aware of genital-differentiation and thus before castration fears. Central to the masochistic scenario is the contract, where the dominant woman, or dominatrix, is granted power over the subordinate male and therefore both parties agree to the relationship.¹⁵³ It recreates the mother and infant's relationship, where the mother

¹⁵² Deleuze based his analysis around Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1870). He gives a very different definition of masochism to Freud. Freud's masochism theory is found in 'A Child is Being Beaten' (1919), where he suggests that masochism arises later in life because the child enjoyed watching a father figure physically punish a child when he was young and wishes himself to be in that position. This gives the father the prominent role, rather than the mother, and views sadism as similar to masochism (whereas Deleuze argues that they are distinct).

¹⁵³ The notion that the male masochist 'demands for himself absolute power of contract but with the goal of rendering himself powerless' is absurd, and deliberately so (Henderson 2008, 182). The whole masochistic scenario is bound with opposites, as Deleuze says:

A close examination of masochistic fantasies or rites reveals that while they bring into play the very strictest application of the law, the result in every case is the opposite of what might be expected (thus whipping, far from punishing or preventing an erection, provokes and ensures it).

Deleuze 2013, 88.

Thus, the law is absurd during this recreation of the primal relationship with the mother that precedes the law of the father (patriarchy, see Introduction). The masochist has turned 'guilt on its head by making punishment into

was the source of authority, and thus the role of the father is suspended: ‘the totality of the law is invested upon the mother, who expels the father from the symbolic realm’ (Deleuze 2013, 90). In the masochistic relationship between Lola and Rath, the professor symbolically enters a contract with Lola because he *willingly* stays with a woman who both mothers and punishes him; thus, Rath is to blame for his own subordination.

Using Deleuze’s work, feminist film theorist Gaylyn Studlar explores masochism in the films of von Sternberg and Dietrich in *In the Realm of Pleasure* (1988). As masochism speaks to pre-Oedipal rather than Oedipal desires, this has a profound impact on reading cinematic spectatorship. As has been discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, Laura Mulvey views cinematic narratives as Oedipal, with women in cinema signifying male castration anxieties as the passive object of the male’s gaze. For Mulvey, woman is object to the male’s sadistic voyeurism or fetishistic scopophilia, and she particularly views Dietrich in von Sternberg’s films as the ultimate fetish object onscreen that serves to assuage the male’s fears. However, Studlar critiques Mulvey’s use of sadism and neglect of masochism and quotes D. N. Rodowick: ‘...Mulvey defines fetishistic scopophilia as an overvaluation of the object...but he (Freud) would also add that this phenomenon is one of the fundamental sources of *authority* defined as passive submission to the object: in sum, masochism...’ (qtd. in Studlar 1988, 37). This would suggest that masochism would position woman’s *image* as a source of authority with men taking a passive position. However, to maintain her dichotomy of male as active and female as passive, Mulvey does not consider the role of masochism in her theory. Studlar’s work serves to highlight that desire in film cannot be reduced to Oedipal castration anxieties but can also be viewed in terms of masochistic pleasure and the pre-Oedipal wish for the powerful mother.¹⁵⁴

Fundamental to the workings of masochism is the fetish. As has been discussed in the Introduction, in Freudian theory, the young boy is in disbelief that the mother does not have a penis. Therefore, he regresses to the last point at which he believed the ‘female phallus was still possible’ (Studlar 1988, 38). This manifests in a fetishized object that covers up the mother’s genital differences, such as the phallic snakes on Medusa’s head, and it delays the belief that she has been castrated by the father. As mentioned, according to Mulvey, in film, women are fetishized for this same reason, such as Dietrich’s long legs. However, fetishism

a condition that makes possible the forbidden pleasure’ (this forbidden pleasure being a breaking of the law that forbids incest with the mother) and ‘overthrows the law’ (Deleuze 2013, 89).

¹⁵⁴ Studlar also notes that we should not be reductive and argue that all women evoke this pre-Oedipal desire, but that there has to be an awareness of more than one form of pleasure at play.

also occurs in the pre-Oedipal stage. This occurs when the infant wishes for symbiosis with the mother, and thus while ‘the fetish may represent a maternal phallus, it also represents other parts of her body “from which he (the infant) did not wish to be separated”’ (Studlar 1988, 40). The fetish thus arises out of fear of separating from the mother and the wish to identify with her in bisexual non-differentiation. Male masochism therefore presents an issue for the male spectator. To quote Studlar: ‘He identifies with culturally assigned feminine characteristics exhibited by the male within the masochistic scenario or with the powerful female who represents the pre-Oedipal mother of primary identification’, therefore in both cases ‘the male spectator assumes a position in some way associated with the female’ (Studlar 1988, 44-45). In a society that designates women as passive and inferior, the male is emasculated and it becomes clear how Lola embodies anxieties regarding the subversion of gender roles, for in ‘masochism, as in the infantile stage of dependence, pleasure does not involve mastery of the female but submission to her body and gaze’ (Studlar 1988, 29-30). Therefore, Studlar’s use of masochism challenges Mulvey’s assertion of gender binaries and her assumption that woman is simply the passive site of castration fears, as well as the male’s omnipotent gaze.

Dietrich’s Lola repeatedly plays to the gaze, be it while she is onstage as a cabaret performer or her image that is proliferated on posters and postcards. She is aware of how to manipulate her image to ensure her success as a star. It reflected the period where women had increased visibility, particularly through the popularity of cinema, but also because of new fashions and attitudes where there was a ‘dramatic shift from inciting modesty to inciting display, from self-effacement to self-articulation’ (Conor 2004, 29). Women acknowledged their role in the act of looking, much like the unruly woman above, and fashioned themselves accordingly. This self-awareness is found in *The Blue Angel*, and Barbara Kosta gives an analysis of a scene where Professor Rath watches Lola apply her eye-makeup in a mirror. As Kosta states, Lola:

...makes conscious the play of desire and appearance and of pleasure and the dependency of female performance on the male gaze, saying, ‘Nice eyes, huh?’. Without explicitly returning Rath’s gaze, she undermines his attempts at voyeurism and disempowers his gaze by drawing attention to it.
Kosta 2012, 66.

It is not just the male’s gaze with which Dietrich plays. In the masochistic scenario, the powerful dominant woman also speaks to women’s desires to return to the mother. Thus, Dietrich also appeals to the female spectator’s gaze, a perspective that is repeatedly neglected

by early film theory. Dietrich embodies both overt femininity as well as an ‘androgynous eroticism highly charged by sexual ambiguity’ (Studlar 1988, 48-49). This is because of Dietrich’s dominant role but also because she cannot be reduced to one onscreen character. Dietrich was known for her wearing of male attire and bisexuality offscreen, and this is compounded by her androgynous features and often dominant behaviour onscreen. Thus, rather than the female spectator over-identifying with Dietrich’s image as an excessively feminine onscreen counterpart, as Mary Ann Doane argues in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (1991, 31-32), Dietrich’s ‘overt eroticism seems to elicit sexual feelings from straight and lesbian women, gay and straight males’ (Studlar 1988, 49).

Therefore, Lola, as a vamp, and like the femme fatale that follows her, is a projection of male fears regarding changed gender roles and men’s emasculation. The vamp uses her appearance to dominate men while often using it for some sort of economic gain that encroaches on men’s position as a ‘breadwinner’. Madonna, by re-creating this character, also plays to the vamp’s knowingness and dominant role. It reveals her ability to manipulate her appearance to fixate the gaze of the other for her own benefit, while showing that she is an objectified woman who is in control and can return the gaze.¹⁵⁵ Further, by combining different elements from the same period, Madonna enhances the idea that her role of femininity is *performed*. I suggest that Madonna evokes Dietrich particularly because of the sub-cultural codes where Dietrich, an androgynous figure, appealed to both the male and female gaze, to both straight and queer desires. To explore the image onscreen appealing to more than one ‘type’ of gaze, Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman’s work ‘The Gaze Revisited’ (1995) is particularly useful.

Evans and Gamman explore the various forms of ‘gazes’. They advocate taking a Butlerian post-structuralist approach to gaze theory to argue that, rather than the cinema image exclusively forming the subject, its reading is more dependent on the individual identity of the spectator. There is not a rigid identification with the male (via a trans-sex identification by women, according to Mulvey), nor do men and women have to be restricted to identifying with the same sexed image onscreen (in masochism, there is trans-sex identification, and Richard Dyer in *Heavenly Bodies* [1986] found that gay men often identified with Judy Garland). Indeed, there are numerous possible identifications which offer

¹⁵⁵ Barbara Kosta adds that Dietrich exercised a great amount of control over the ‘lighting...camera angels...costuming’ and that ‘von Sternberg’s anguished relationship to Dietrich...undermines notions of male sovereignty’ (Kosta 2012, 80).

a much 'less rigid spectatorial position' (Evans and Gamman 1995, 23). Using Butler's queer theory, Evans and Gamman are arguing that images offer multiple identifications that can take place, even at the same time, thus there is no essentially male, female, gay, lesbian, or even a 'queer' gaze.

As identity is not fixed, there is no fixed gaze, therefore 'it is inappropriate to posit any single identification with images' (Evans and Gamman 1995, 39). Yet, some images do encourage 'polymorphous identifications' as 'the text also is a structuring discourse' and 'cultural meanings are actively generated through representation' (Evans and Gamman 1995, 45). Further, some images do seem to speak more directly to certain spectators. Evans and Gamman give the example of lesbian porn which tends to feature 'butch' women with short hairstyles and nails, in contrast to the girl-on-girl pornography produced by men for straight men (Evans and Gamman 1995, 35). Rather than a 'lesbian' gaze being at work here, it is the 'lesbian subcultural codes' which are read by a lesbian audience because of their subcultural knowledge (Evans and Gamman 1995, 35). One example that Evans and Gamman give is Madonna's video for 'Justify My Love' (1990). The video is sexually ambiguous, with different gendered and sexual identities fluidly changing, making the identity of the onscreen image unclear (Evans and Gamman 1995, 46). 'Justify My Love' is thus a queer representation that encourages the spectator to read it as they wish, and which plays to their own desires. These queer representations reveal gender to be performed and fluid, offering 'wider opportunities for viewing/identification' (Evans and Gamman 1995, 47).

Therefore, I argue that in *Open Your Heart* Madonna consciously draws on the Weimar period and uses queer subcultural codes to appeal to a larger audience. Particularly in her recreation of Dietrich, Madonna highlights how her image appeals to a male and female gaze as well as queer desires. This can still be read as a parody of Dietrich rather than a pastiche of Dietrich, for Madonna takes this to the extreme.¹⁵⁶ The identities that fill the peep show booths in the video and which are watching Madonna are diverse and include racial, gender, and sexual differences, and thus Madonna is also acknowledging her queer offscreen audience. Madonna therefore reveals onscreen how she constructs her appearance to appeal to her wider audience, and thus explicitly shows how desire works in cinema. This is particularly highlighted when Madonna sings: 'I think that you're afraid to look in my eyes',

¹⁵⁶ Parody and pastiche are distinct, but very similar. Ramona Curry in 'Madonna: From Marilyn to Marlene – Pastiche and/or Parody' (1990) argues that although Madonna recreates past icons in order to commodify herself, and thus seemingly uncritically reproduces these images for her own gain, her image can be read as parody because she reveals how cinema plays to certain desires (1990, 25).

while framing her face with a chair and staring directly into the camera. This is her gazing ‘not only at the fictional audience, but at us, the real audience’ (Herr 2004) and acknowledging that she is the object of the gaze. Madonna is thus willingly objectified and *returns* the gaze, while also situating herself as a Gorgon-like figure who is powerful and can stun the viewer into submission, while also encouraging her fans to actively engage and read her image.

The different identities that are enamoured with Madonna’s image within the music video thus reflect the offscreen audience to whom Madonna is also consciously playing. Among the spectators in the video are two gay sailors (a couple) who seemingly take the role of mannequins, an androgynous Black lesbian, a man taking photographs of Madonna and another writing hastily on a piece of paper, not taking his eyes off the pop star the whole time (alluding to the media’s obsession with Madonna), as well as four wooden cut outs of men in tuxedos. These men are also copies of de Lempicka’s art and include *Portrait of Marquis Sommi* (1925) (shown at one minute twenty-two, to the far left of Madonna) and *Portrait of the Marquis d’Afflitto* (1925) (second from the right). The cut outs play to how Madonna fixates the gaze, and it is almost as if the spectator has been turned ‘frozen’ by the Gorgon’s gaze. At two minutes nineteen seconds, Madonna shoots down the cardboard cut outs as if playing a fairground game, and there is no doubt who is in control here. This is Madonna acknowledging herself as an object of the gaze and thus ‘makes her performance available to many gazes, even as she acknowledges the different responses contingent upon the different spectators’ desires’ (Drukman 1995, 89). For example, Steven Drukman argues that the gay mannequins ‘gazing on Madonna’s release of sexual drives apparently enables their desires to be met’ (Drukman 1995, 89). Although, admittedly, having two gay men represented on screen as two inanimate objects is not the most subversive of representations, it is a ‘wink and nod to Madonna’s gay male following while conceding to the more repressive aspects of *MTV* and popular culture’ (Drukman 1995, 90). Further, the androgynous lesbian, ‘has clearly found satisfaction in the spectacle, smoking a traditional after-sex cigarette’ (Guilbert 2002, 47). Thus, to quote Drukman, a ‘lesbian gaze’ has been ‘seemingly sated’ (1995, 90).

At the end of the video, the shutters of the peepshow booths go down, pointing to how Madonna enraptures her audience who crane their necks practically begging to see more of her. The spectators are subordinate to Madonna’s image, while the pop star can disrupt the spectacle whenever she likes and escape objectification. As Madonna leaves the theatre, she wears an androgynous get up of a porkpie hat and suit. She has successfully worn

womanliness to achieve her goal, only to set it aside when she no longer needs it. The codes and ambiguity of Madonna's video thus allow her to be read as her audience understands her, enabling both straight and queer desires, and thus appealing to a broad demographic. While she knowingly fixates the gaze, she again encourages an engagement with her image which mobilises her fan base, and this continues in 'Express Yourself'.

Express Yourself (1989)

Further showing Madonna's affinity for the art and film of interwar Germany, this video parodies the German expressionist film *Metropolis* (1927, directed by Fritz Lang and based on the novel written by his wife Thea von Harbou in 1925). It is also the film where Madonna had the most input: 'I oversaw everything – the building of the sets, everyone's costumes, I had meetings with makeup and hair and the cinematographer, everybody. Casting, finding the right cat – just every aspect. Kind of like making a little movie' (Madonna qtd. in Weingarten et al 2015). To determine why Madonna was attracted to this film and how she and director David Fincher manipulate the film's visual and narrative plot, the contextual anxieties that *Metropolis* embodied must be understood. As has been mentioned, the post-war period in Germany changed women's status in society, and it was particularly their presence in workplaces that had previously been dominated by men before the war that led to concerns. Women's increased visibility in public areas and the fact that proletariat families were having fewer children because of the cost of living, threatened the patriarchal family dynamic and led to political ideologies that were targeted at female sexuality. To make sure there would be enough workers in future generations, propaganda was used to discourage sex outside of marriage and to focus on the maternal role of women, whose duties should be to return to the domestic sphere and to give birth (Stoicesa 2006, 29). Tensions surrounding the regulation of female sexuality became bound with class, but there was another underlying issue of the period: technology. Many had witnessed its destructive potential during the war, but it was also viewed as the future of societal progression (Huysen 1986, 67). These anxieties regarding gender, class, and technology fraught with ambivalence manifest in *Metropolis*.

The basic premise of the film is the division between workers and the elite, with the workers living below ground and operating dangerous machines that ostensibly run the city of Metropolis above. Mimicking the city's landscape, 'Express Yourself' is dominated by rising skyscrapers, monorails, and aeroplanes that are juxtaposed with the harsh, damp conditions where the workers live below. In the film, Joh Frederson is the wealthy owner of

the city and in the opening scenes we meet his son Freder, who enjoys sports and chasing prostitutes in the 'Eternal Gardens'. Madonna is also situated above ground in a penthouse akin to that of the 'Club of the Sons', where the wealthy elite live. Madonna seems to be the lover of a wealthy businessman, similar to that of Joh Frederson, who is a middle-aged man in a suit and is juxtaposed with the young, athletic, and topless men who act as the workers. This reading of Madonna as the businessman's lover could be taken to reflect the gender dynamics in *Metropolis*, where there is a distinction between female sexuality and class. When women are shown in the city of Metropolis, they play the role of prostitutes, whereas women below ground are reduced to their maternal functions. As Gabriela Stoicea says, below ground the workers are only men; whereas the lights in the homes signify that women remain in the domestic sphere (Stoicea 2006, 25). This seemingly reflects the concerns surrounding working class women and the family unit. With Madonna living above ground in a penthouse, this would therefore suggest that her character functions as a woman whose primary role is to provide the businessman with sexual pleasure. However, Madonna's role cannot be easily identified. As Melanie Morton (1993) notes in her analysis of the music video, Madonna is first shown in *Express Yourself* in athletic garb comparable to that worn by Freder when he engages in physical exercise at the beginning of *Metropolis* (1993, 225). Madonna could thus be read as a female version of Freder. She desires a male worker played by Cameron Alborzian and, similarly, Freder becomes enamoured with a woman from below ground called Maria.

When Maria is first shown in the film, she accompanies a group of children to show them the city of Metropolis. She catches Freder's attention and distracts him from the prostitutes he is chasing. Therefore, Maria, an unmarried virgin who is also placed in a maternal role for none of the children are biologically hers, is contrasted with the sexuality of the prostitutes who entertain the elite men. Yet, aware of Freder's gaze Maria becomes an object of desire while in a maternal role (Stoicea 2006, 35). Conflating the two, she transgresses her gender role of either/or and thus she becomes a threat. Intrigued by Maria, Freder follows her below ground, and this is his first encounter with both the workers and the machinery (this is unlike the music video where Madonna does not go below ground to follow her lover but sends a cat to bring the worker to her).¹⁵⁷ When Freder glimpses at a

¹⁵⁷ Later in the video, it's suggested that Madonna is also cat-like as she sips milk from a saucer. This draws intriguing parallels with the science fiction novella *The Ballad of Lost C'Mell* (1962). Here, the female lead is a cat-person known as an 'underperson' who has little rights and who works as a prostitute. There could be

giant machine, he watches as it overheats and fatally injures the men who were operating it. Collapsing, he hallucinates and envisions the machine as a temple of 'Moloch', an ancient god mentioned in the Bible to whom children were sacrificed. Children in this hallucination are replaced with chained workers who enter the temple via Moloch's mouth, and it can thus be read as symbolising the very real threat that dangerous factories posed to the children working in them (Stoicea 2006, 27-28). Yet, in the film, there are no children, or even women, in the factories, and thus Andreas Huyssen reads this as the connection between female sexuality, with Freder's lust for Maria, and technology, with Moloch symbolising the *vagina dentata* and the fear of castration (1986, 79 – note that Medusa as the *vagina dentata* is the subject of the subsequent chapter). Therefore, female sexuality in this film is projected onto the machinery, and it is *dangerous*.

After Freder runs to tell his father Joh what he has seen, Joh goes below ground to investigate and witnesses Maria preaching to a group of male workers saying that there will soon be a 'mediator' to help their poor conditions. This again throws into confusion which role Madonna is taking in her music video. In 'Express Yourself' Madonna initially seems to be Freder's lover or even Freder, but she also draws comparison with Maria. At the beginning of the video, and while wearing an athletic costume like Freder's, Madonna declares: 'Come on girls, do you believe in love? 'Cause I've got something to say about, and it goes something like this' ('Express Yourself' 1989). Madonna here becomes more like Maria as a *preacher*, but rather than preaching to male workers, Madonna directs her proclamation towards women. Further, while Maria preaches below ground, Madonna is above ground. It suggests that Madonna is the woman who can address a female audience and encourage them to have female desire, to be sexual. It also shows that, rather than Madonna showing a gender reversal in this video with her becoming Freder or Freder's lover or simply being reduced to a sexual commodity, she 'calls attention to the dialectics of domination by refusing to repeat the rule of these oppositions' (Morton 1993, 216). Madonna's vision of *Metropolis* is therefore 'deconstructive', it depicts opposites without privileging one side or the other although, as noted by Morton, the imperative title of the song 'contradicts a purely deconstructive interpretation' (1993, 222). Without prioritising a particular reading, I suggest that this is another example of Madonna using her videos to encourage a wider participation from her audience.

inference here that Madonna is the cat who lures men to her, however, as discussed, Madonna cannot simply be reduced to the role of prostitute.

To appeal to a wider audience, I argue that Madonna *again* plays to the trope of the vamp, who is a key figure in *Metropolis* and played by Maria's robotic *double*. When Joh finds Maria preaching peace to the workers underground, he considers Maria a threat. Read against the anxiety of containing female sexuality in Weimar Germany, it is apparent that what Joh fears is the conflation of feminine sexuality and the virginal role of Maria (Stoicea 2006, 35-6). Therefore, Rotwang, Fredersen's scientist, kidnaps Maria and creates a cyborg in her image. Maria's sexuality is displaced onto the robot, while she is reduced once more to a virginal role. Thus, to quote Huyssen: 'the vamp of the film *is* a technological artifact upon which a specifically male view of destructive female sexuality has been projected' (1986, 74). Man uses technology here to separate the vamp and the virgin into two distinct bodies. It implies that man has control over both women and technology (although this control is shown to be feeble for Rotwang loses a hand when creating the machine [Huyssen 1986, 73]).

Men have created woman here in a way that conforms to patriarchal gender ideals, while also alluding to the inherently dangerous potential of women for the external appearance of the robotic Maria hides her true treacherous identity. In doing so, Joh has realised a way in which he can manipulate the workers. Rotwang invites the city's male elite to a party where the cyborg vamp Maria is a spectacle that plays to and captures the men's gazes. She performs an erotic dance for the audience and wears very little clothing, and Morton posits that this Maria evokes the Gorgon, much like the machine Moloch symbolises the vagina dentata: 'The serpents surrounding the cyborg and her capacity to fascinate the male gaze suggests the figure of Medusa, a well-known symbol of castration' (Morton 1993, 230). The vamp is certainly a Medusa-like figure for, in an eery scene at around one hour and thirty-two, the camera cuts from the cyborg's performance to a screen that becomes filled only with the sets of fixated male eyes watching her. Further, Frederic vicariously adds his male gaze to the rest of the male elite by watching Maria perform in a daydream. Morton thus reads this scene as evoking castration anxiety, as woman is constructed by these men as an 'object of their desires' (1993, 230). However, Maria as a vamp has been created by Rotwang to incite this desire, thus rather than the elite male gaze being controlling, I would posit that it is *Maria's* image that holds power. As has been discussed above, the vamp encapsulates male fears of the subversion of gender roles via domination, and manipulates her appearance to play to male desires, rather than simply evoking castration anxieties. That the men are almost slaves to her image is shown when they run after Maria after her performance in a sort of hypnotic state. When Maria stops and removes a garter from her thigh and throws it into the

crowd, the elite men lose control, and fight one another over the item. Maria's control is also shown when she presents herself to the workers. As a 'mouthpiece of Joh Fredersen' the vamp encourages the workers to 'rebel against him' so that Fredersen 'can be justified in using force against them' (*Metropolis* 1927).

By speaking to the workers' desires, the robotic Maria seduces these men into rebellion, with her 'provocative vocabulary and body language' that stirs the workers in to a 'sexual drive that had previously been denied to them' (Stoicea 2006, 36). It is this ability for the vamp to use her image by actively speaking to male desires that Madonna plays to so effectively. Madonna recreates the scene where the vamp Maria performs as a spectacle. While her male love interest is sleeping, and thus taking the role of Freder, the camera shows Madonna in lingerie erotically dancing behind a dressing screen. However, the male's gaze is not omnipotent here as the screen does not fully reveal Madonna, and when the worker wakes from his dream, it is Madonna's eyes, imposed at the top of the screen that watch him; therefore, neither a male nor female gaze is prioritised, unlike the film (Morton 1993, 230). Madonna thus returns the worker's gaze, and points to her awareness of being watched. Madonna also employs masochistic elements throughout the video. At around two-minutes forty-one, Madonna is shown lying in bed with a leather collar around her neck. It appears that she takes the role of the masochist, but rather than being in a vulnerable position, she stares directly into the camera, and thus challenges the 'spectator's access to illusions of control' again by *returning* the gaze, something that she does so well in 'Open Your Heart' (Morton 1993, 229-230). In relation to the masochistic scene, Madonna in an interview expressed her exasperation about the public's obsession with the use of masochism in 'Express Yourself'. She said:

There wasn't a man that put that chain on me, I did it myself...I crawled under my own table, you know, there wasn't a man standing there making me do it. I do everything by my own volition. I'm in charge, okay?
ABC Nightline (1990).

Further, when the male lover joins her in the penthouse, she puts chains on him, showing that power is transferable. While Morton states that Madonna subverts the visual narrative of *Metropolis* by 'establishing the bearer of the gaze as female. *Even though* she plays with the representation of the vamp and the masochist, she also stays in constant control of the gaze' (emphasis my own, 1993, 230), I suggest that it is *because* of the vamp and masochism that Madonna subverts the gaze. The cyborg Maria speaks to the role of the vamp, much like

Marlene Dietrich's Lola, by bringing into question the roles of domination. Contrary to the arguments put forward by Mulvey, the vamp's image has a power and hold over men. By appealing to men's desires, the men onscreen are the submissive receivers of her image and there is a loss of control. It would therefore seem that the male gaze is not omnipotent, while the image of woman is not simply passive. Unlike the cyborg, Madonna constructs her *own* appearance as well as the visual narrative of the video. It is her awareness of the power she holds by being watched that leads her to appeal to desires that extend *beyond* the male's gaze.

This is signified by her use of masochism, which evokes the pre-Oedipal mother and thus appeals to male and female spectators, but is also evident in Madonna's call to women to action at the start of the video. As mentioned, this seems to position Madonna momentarily as Maria, thus situating the female spectators as the workers. This suggests that the female spectator identifies with the oppressed workers who must 'express' themselves (Morton 1993, 223). Yet, these highly eroticised workers are also desirable to a straight female and queer audience. Therefore, as Morton states: 'as identification and desire flow in opposite directions, any attempt to determine one or the other contradicts...it deconstructs the notion that our identifications must not be partial, multiple, or contradictory' (1993, 223). Further, after Madonna and the worker begin to kiss in the penthouse, the scene interchanges between the workers below ground fighting, with the businessman taking the role of Frederesen watching in the shadows. The unity of the two lovers leads the male workers to revolt, just as they do in *Metropolis*, but their fighting is so homoerotic that it lends towards a reading of Madonna's sexuality opening others up to their desires. The businessman retreats into the shadows as he is threatened by what he sees, signifying his defeat and Madonna's victory. This is unlike *Metropolis* where the cyborg Maria is burnt at the stake, and the real Maria is returned to her role as a 'a helpless mother figure who is totally dependent on male support' and who is no longer the object of Freder's desire (Huysen 1986, 80).

In the film, fear of technology has been displaced onto female sexuality, and once female sexuality has been suppressed the status quo can return. Both the elite and the workers unite against female sexuality as a common enemy, and with it being brought back under control, the proletariat women, who had joined the 'witch hunt' to burn the cyborg, return to their homes, and the rich and the poor men go back to the way things were, with machinery no longer a threat. The film ends with the quote: 'The mediator between head and hands must be the heart', with Freder as the mediator that Maria prophesied – he has returned the status quo. In the video, rather than the status quo being restored, female sexuality has disrupted the

class and gender hierarchies of this version of *Metropolis*, where Madonna is not punished, and the workers are freed. By not prioritising any particular reading, the appeal of 'Express Yourself' is open to a wide audience, particularly speaking to queer and class interests. Not only is the businessman defeated, but the video also suggests that Madonna takes his place. At around mark two minutes fifteen, Madonna is shown wearing a suit and monocle that emulates the outfit worn by the businessman and speaks to particularly lesbian desires. She performs on a staircase in this costume, grabbing her crotch and revealing her bra underneath her tuxedo. That this scene takes place on a staircase is significant. Mónica C. Pascual (2000), in their analysis of the scene, quotes Mary Ann Doane's suggestion that the staircase is 'traditionally the locus of specularization of the woman. It is on the stairway that she is displayed as spectacle for the male gaze' (Doane 1984, 72 qtd. in Pascual 2000, 88). However, as Pascual says in their interpretation of this scene, Madonna reverses the roles here (2000, 88). She is consciously attracting the gaze on the stairwell, but it is she who possesses the look, and this is signified by her wearing the monocle, as glasses signify looking. Patrick Bade interprets the monocle as a 'badge of interwar lesbianism' (2006, 65), which is intriguing as Madonna seems to *again* be copying the outfits and style of Marlene Dietrich here by wearing her blonde hair in a similar style while in a suit and, later, smoking a cigarette. The queerness of Dietrich is used to suggest the sexual liberation of interwar Berlin, and Madonna repeatedly uses the vamp from the period to point to her performance of gender, her awareness of being watched, and her ability to stare back.¹⁵⁸ Madonna, by basing her image on past icons, thus exposes 'the devices structuring cinematic desire, fantasy, and stardom' (Curry 1990, 25).

In this video then, I argue that Madonna does not mindlessly repeat the film's plot but subversively plays with its visuals and narrative. Multiple identifications are available via the different roles Madonna performs throughout the video, and she transitions from boy toy hidden away in the top of a tower, a masochist, and even into a cat whom she sends as a messenger to the depths of the city while she is shown in her tower on all fours sipping milk from a saucer. Whereas prescribed gender roles in *Metropolis* reflect the cultural anxieties of the time, Madonna celebrates women's sexuality in the late 1980s and women's increasing rise to important roles in the workplace as she takes over the businessman's job. Further, in the video the businessman can be read as some sort of music executive, for at one point he

¹⁵⁸ Although, this is also juxtaposed with a symbol of Nazism, the 'loudspeaker...A propaganda tool and Nazi icon' (Morton 1993, 231). Again, it is deconstructive, but it also explores domination, much like the use of masochism (Morton 1993, 232).

presses a button on a remote control and watches a live jazz band play after he has turned them on as if a record player. Madonna, by wearing the suit in imitation of this businessman/music executive, shows that white male positions of power are not secure. It points to how women have been deprived of powerful positions, and thus Madonna is urging women into action on two fronts: their sexual and economic desire.

Conclusion

In conclusion, returning to Julie Brown's parody of Madonna as Medusa and Garber and Vickers interpretation of 'Vogue' as embodying Craig Owens' power of the pose, this initial reading of Madonna as the Gorgon suggested that, through her excessive nature, she fixates the gaze of her audience. Through an analysis of three of her music videos where she most clearly plays with film, I have argued that Madonna is a semi-Medusa who fixates, but also mobilises the spectator, while also showing that her image does not only speak to male desires or Oedipal fears. By parodying the dumb blonde and the vamp, Madonna reveals that she is playing with the gaze by performing femininity. By revealing gender as a performance and incorporating subtexts into her videos, Madonna encourages her fans to engage with her image. This is Madonna challenging essentialist definitions of men and women, while similarly acknowledging that, to ensure her success, she must appeal to as wide a demographic as possible. Madonna thus challenges the idea that woman as object is a passive image. Taking Medusa as an analogy, women when looked at directly, can be powerful and can return the gaze.

Madonna paved the way for future female pop stars to use their image and to construct themselves as spectacles. Instead of some pop stars simply using sex to sell, Madonna, and indeed the rest of the pop stars in this thesis, use their image to challenge power dynamics and, I argue, to empower themselves and their fans. This chapter thus shows how a Medusa lens can be used to read a woman who does not explicitly become the Gorgon in her work. Through a Medusa lens, the gaze in object/subject relations can be explored, while arguing that female pop stars can have control over their image and are orchestrating how they are viewed. Further, these pop stars are engaging with monstrous figures of women that have largely been created by men and embody male fears regarding gender roles and sex difference. Just as Medusa was repeatedly depicted as a woman who transcended gender roles and embodied the fear and suspicion of women, the pop stars of this thesis have agency for they create their own narratives, away from the male lens of Perseus' shield. While Madonna

plays with the innately monstrous vamp, Rihanna, Azealia Banks, and as will be discussed next, Lady Gaga, become externally monstrous. Lady Gaga, is strongly influenced by Madonna, and in the subsequent chapter, I will question why this female pop star reappropriates the monstrous and why this is so appealing to her audience.

Chapter 4

Medusa as Vagina Dentata: Lady Gaga as the Victim who Bites

Horror emerges from the fact that woman has broken with her proper feminine role – she has ‘made a spectacle of herself’ – put her unsocialized body on display. Creed 1993a, 42.

Madonna and Lady Gaga are frequently compared to one another as artists, and just as Madonna used sex to attract and stun her audience, Gaga’s outrageous outfits and behaviour, such as the meat dress she wore to the *MTV Video Music Awards* in 2010, are designed to shock. Thus, while Madonna certainly changed the way female pop stars could use themselves as spectacles and was inspired by feminine tropes of innate female monstrosity, Lady Gaga, in contrast, explicitly uses horror to construct herself as *externally* monstrous. The monster was a later development in Gaga’s career, and it first appeared when she was working on *The Fame Monster* (2009), a deluxe edition of her debut album *The Fame* (2008), which could also be bought separately as an EP.¹⁵⁹ Though *The Fame Monster* was released in November 2009, Gaga was reported calling her fans ‘Little Monsters’ at one of her concerts in July 2009 (Davisson 2013, 36). Then, in October 2009, Gaga released the single ‘Bad Romance’ where she referred to herself as a monster in the video and danced with her hand in the shape of a claw: the collective Little Monster symbol. *The Fame Monster* and subsequent use of the monstrous marked a new era in Gaga’s career. This was cemented when fans began to call Gaga ‘Mother Monster’, a role she readily adopted on the twenty-eighth of March 2010, when she referred to herself on *Twitter* as Mother Monster for the first time (Davisson 2013, 36-7).

¹⁵⁹ *The Fame Monster* featured eight new tracks, with many taking a monstrous theme. As mentioned, although *The Fame Monster* could be bought as part of a deluxe addition of *The Fame*, it could also be bought as a separate piece of work as an EP. As Gaga said: ‘I would not add, nor take away any songs from this EP. It is a complete conceptual and musical body of work that can stand on its own two feet’ (qtd. in Woolston 2012, 113).

Gaga's appropriation of the monstrous has led some of her fans to create numerous pieces of artwork that connect and portray Gaga as a specific monster: Medusa. These images vary and are mostly drawn or digitally created by amateur artists, yet Gaga, to my knowledge, has never explicitly used Medusa as part of her act. This chapter will explore the similarities between Gaga and the Gorgon, while also contending that Medusa can be used to read Gaga's appropriation of the monstrous. In doing so, I will argue that Medusa and Gaga are not simply monstrous women, but that they evoke the *vagina dentata*: the vagina with teeth. This chapter will thus propose that Gaga uses the monstrous to play to male fears of the female body to empower herself in a male-dominated industry by having control over her image, while also using the monstrous to appeal to the gaze of her audience.

Yet, why the monstrous is so appealing to Gaga's fans is not immediately clear. While male rock stars often use monstrous themes, the heavy metal band, *Slipknot*, being a prime example, female pop stars are often admired for their conventional beauty and femininity, aspects that are not synonymous with physical monstrosity. Further, Rihanna and Azealia Banks' use of the monstrous Gorgon was not an established part of their pop star persona but used temporarily in a magazine and a music video. More, as has been discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the monstrous-feminine has repeatedly been used to demonise and subjugate women and the oppressed. Yet, Gaga's use of the monstrous has been supremely successful in initiating a close bond with her audience, particularly with those fans who feel 'Other', and the pop star has several tattoos that reflect this relationship. For example, one of her tattoos on her arm reads 'Little Monsters', another shows the clawed hand Little Monster symbol, and the words 'Mother Monster' are tattooed on her rib cage (Sasso 2019). Her fans and the monstrous have thus become a fixed part of her identity as permanent markers, and while Gaga uses a range of monstrous themes, some fans clearly feel there is a connection with the Gorgon. As Medusa is a unique monster who attracts and fixates the gaze, I contend that by applying a Medusa lens to Lady Gaga, a better understanding of why this pop star and her fans are drawn to the monstrous-feminine can be given.

This chapter will focus on Gaga's initial use of the monster, and the following will explore her later role as Mother Monster. Both chapters will, however, use Medusa to explore how this pop star uses the monster to attract the gaze of the audience and how she uses it to bond with her fans. To begin this study, I shall first draw my own comparison between these two figures' by exploring their initial transformations into monsters.

Becoming the Monster

In a striking similarity, both Medusa and Gaga suffer a form of trauma before they are turned into monsters, and this particular version of Medusa's myth is first found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Although already described in the introduction of this thesis, it is worth revisiting Ovid's unique take on her story. At the end of book four of Ovid's poem, Perseus is celebrating his marriage to Andromeda at a banquet. The attendees ask Perseus about Medusa, for he had slain the Gorgon prior to saving Andromeda, enquiring why she alone of the three Gorgon sisters had snake-hair (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.790-792). Perseus says that the goddess Minerva (Athena) had seen Neptune (Poseidon), who had taken the form of a bird, violating Medusa in her temple (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.798. The Latin word '*vitiasse*' is used here, and has been translated by Raeburn (2004) as 'raped'). Consequently, the goddess punished this act by replacing the beautiful Medusa's attractive hair with snakes and thus turning her into a monster. Various other versions of the tale describe Medusa and Neptune's union as consensual (for example, Hesiod, *Theogony* 270ff, Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 2.4.2), but Ovid clearly presents this act as unwanted.

However, Medusa's violation cannot be directly viewed through a modern lens. In Athenian law, rape against a woman was such a cause for anxiety because the *polis* was predicated on a patrilineal inheritance system. Thus, a rape which could result in a pregnancy and an illegitimate child was an attack on the *kyrios*' honour rather than simply the woman's body or personhood (Mitchell 2008, 424 – *kyrios* being the ancient Greek word referring to the man of the household). Similarly, in Roman law, the rape of a woman was deemed an attack on the *paterfamilias* (the Roman equivalent of the *kyrios*) (Mitchell 2008, 425). Women did not have ownership of their body like their modern counterparts, and even in the modern day, our general understanding of rape often differs from the very limited legal definition. However, Medusa was still a victim of male violence, and sexual assault is an extremely traumatic experience that would have changed her psychologically, but it also changed her *physically*. The punishment and physical change of Medusa is severe but can be understood better by considering its context. In the Greek and Roman world, the temple was a divine space which could be 'polluted'.¹⁶⁰ Pollution here is meant in symbolic terms, and the word in Greek is *miasma*. Therefore, before entering a temple, one should be in a state of

¹⁶⁰ For a different and interesting take on why Minerva may have turned Medusa into a monster see Enterline (2000) who argues that Minerva may have done so to punish, not just Medusa, but men by creating a monster that largely petrified male victims.

ritual purity, and thus Medusa's sexual assault in Minerva's temple is a clear violation. However, this can be taken further. Although Ovid is a Roman poet, it is quite clear that in the Greek world 'the temenos represented an extension of the divine body' (Petrovic and Petrovic 2016, 29. Note that *temenos* refers to a 'sacred enclosure', and this includes the temple and the land surrounding it). It can therefore be argued that it was not just the temple that became polluted, but Minerva herself.¹⁶¹ Further, rape in ancient mythology is not directly comparable to modern definitions. Classicist James Robson (1997), for example, suggests that in Greek mythology, the rape of a virgin girl (*parthenos*) by a male god who had taken the form of an animal, achieved lasting fame as their children (demi-gods) would be future heroes (Europa is a good example). However, in myths where young girls attempted to evade the god's advances, they would often be changed into an object or a being that restricted them from re-entering society (Robson 1997, 76, and Robson here gives the example of Philyra [Pseudo-Hyginus, *Fabulae* 138]). According to Robson, this is because myth served to propagate gender roles, and thus girls who rejected the god's advances simultaneously rejected the social role of motherhood that the male god was bestowing upon them.¹⁶² This can be applied to Medusa, as Neptune took the form of a bird to assault her and her subsequent transition into a monster, who turns those who look at her into stone, forces her to live outside of society.¹⁶³

While rape in the ancient world does not directly correspond with modern understandings, Medusa has been reclaimed by women who deem her symbolic of a female casualty of male violence and a silenced rape victim whose body has been invaded, and her agency removed. Ann Stanford's poem 'Medusa' (1977), for example, describes Medusa's ordeal and horror at being left to give birth to her rapist's children: Chrysaor and Pegasus. The poem can be read against the Roe versus Wade legislation three years prior, which saw the Supreme Court lift the ban on abortion, and thus Elizabeth Johnston in her analysis argues that the poem imagines a world where abortion was once again illegal, and rape victims were once more forced to give birth to their rapist's children (2017, 187). Medusa has continued to

¹⁶¹ Further, Minerva/Athena and Neptune/Poseidon had a fraught history, particularly when they competed for Athens. This may explain why Minerva reacted so strongly.

¹⁶² For more on rape in the ancient world please see *Rape in Antiquity: Sexual Violence in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Deacy and Pierce 1997).

¹⁶³ Rape in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* should also be understood in relation to its historical context. As Helene Morales acknowledges, Ovid was writing at a time when the emperor Augustus, who aligned himself with Jupiter and Apollo, enforced stringent laws that were concerned with morals. Ovid was exiled by Augustus in 8 CE (the year he finished *Metamorphoses*). Therefore, by portraying the gods whom Augustus had aligned himself with as 'repeatedly imposing their power upon unwilling victims. By association, he suggests that Augustus is autocratic and abusive' (Morales 2020, 75).

be aligned with women's sexual rights. In 2008, for example, artist Luciano Garbati created a sculpture of a nude Medusa holding aloft the head of Perseus (an inversion of Benvenuto Cellini's statue *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* [1545-1554]). The artist re-tweeted the use of the image in support of its use to embody female anger over violations of reproductive rights.¹⁶⁴ More recently, in October 2020, it was announced that the statue would be erected in New York City, opposite the New York County Criminal Court (where rapist and ex-film producer Harvey Weinstein was convicted) as a commentary on the #MeToo movement, the blaming of rape victims, and the changing-tides where justice is served and rapists are punished. Yet, the statue was not well received. Many have pointed out that while Perseus was Medusa's murderer, he was not her rapist. Further, the statue's only monstrous feature is Medusa's snake hair and Garbati (who is a man) has shown Medusa nude, though devoid of pubic hair, and this led *Twitter* user izzy levy to comment: 'as if any body hair, fat, or muscle on a woman is potentially as monstrous as fangs' [@milesphoebes 2020]).¹⁶⁵

Therefore, while Medusa's rape and subsequent transformation must be viewed in relation to its ancient context, the way her story has been received by a modern audience as a complex symbol of male violence against women, the silencing of female victims, as well as an empowering figure of women's rage, can be used in conjunction with her myth to, I argue, analyse Gaga's appropriation of the monstrous and to read the pop star as a Medusa figure.

Regarding her first use of the monstrous, Gaga initially alluded to some form of past ordeal that inspired *The Fame Monster* (2009) and stated that the EP's title was used to reflect her fears that had arisen since her newfound fame. Each song, she said, dealt with a different fear, a different *monster*: 'While travelling the world for two years, I've encountered several monsters, each represented by a different song on the new record: my "Fear of Sex Monster," my "Fear of Alcohol Monster," my "Fear of Love Monster" ...' (quoted in Dinh 2009). During her *Monster Ball Tour 2.0* (2010-2011) the 'fame monster' would appear onstage as a giant angler fish with large tentacles, while Gaga performed her hit

¹⁶⁴ It also featured in an exhibition called *Medusa with the Head (MWTH)* where 10% of proceeds were donated to protect women and girls from sexual abuse and to provide accessible female health care.

¹⁶⁵ Other *Twitter* users have voiced their dislike of the violence of the statue, for example, Ana Mardoll wrote: 'I am a rape survivor. I do not want a sword. I do not want more violence. I am not an aggressor. I want *help*.' (@AnaMardoll 2020). It is understandable why, in this context, many feel the statue is unsuitable. Some *Twitter* users, such as Based Viking referred to the statue as 'anti-men' (@TheBasedViking 2020), which is interesting as they seem to have missed the fact that the statue is an inversion of Cellini's original, and that women have had to listen to, and see, Perseus' decapitation of Medusa, or watch as men have repeatedly got away with sexually abusing and raping women's bodies, repeatedly
For more on Medusa's connection with the 'Me Too' movement, see May (2018), and Bevan (2019).

‘Paparazzi’.¹⁶⁶ Whilst Gaga sang, the monster would strip Gaga of her clothes, and she would scream out to her fans to help her defeat it. The fame monster can be defeated by taking photos of it and can thus be understood as the media or the music industry that exploits others but cannot ‘survive audience scrutiny’ (Davisson 2013, 34). Gaga at this point of the performance disappears from the stage and re-emerges wearing a metal bra that fires sparks (a pyro-bra, the same she wore for her ‘Bad Romance’ (2009) music video, discussed below). Together, Lady Gaga and her fans collectively defeat the monster in their shared monstrous identity: ‘Monsters, as we stand together, we can achieve anything, we can do anything’ (Gaga quoted in Davisson 2013, 34). By addressing her fans in this way, Gaga makes a distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ monsters (Davisson 2013, 34-5). Our fears are monsters, bad people are monsters, but one must similarly *become* a monster to defeat them.

It was several years after *The Fame Monster* that Gaga suggested that the main monster, the main source of pain and fear that inspired the album, was rape. Gaga first revealed she was raped in December 2014 to Howard Stern: ‘I wrote a song called “Swine”. The song is about rape...I had a lot of pain that I wanted to release’ (qtd. in Johnson 2014). ‘Swine’ is a song taken from the album *Artpop* (2013) and it is to Stern that Gaga confirms, for the first time in the media, that she was repeatedly raped by a man, whom she says was a music producer, at the age of nineteen (she is twenty-eight at the time of the interview) and that she still feels its impact. As *Vogue* magazine printed in 2018:

She was still Stefani Germanotta when she was raped at nineteen by a music producer. She told no one. ‘It took years’, she says. ‘No one else knew. It was almost like I tried to erase it from my brain. And when it finally came out, it was like a big, ugly monster. And you have to face the monster to heal’.
Gaga to Van Meter (2018).¹⁶⁷

Gaga’s reference to the effects of the rape as a ‘big, ugly monster’ relates to this distinction Gaga creates between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ monsters, where she, and her fans, become the good monsters that defeat their fears and traumas. It can be inferred, then, that the ‘fame monster’ that appeared onstage during the tour can be read as the music business that seeks to exploit

¹⁶⁶ *The Monster Ball* tour consists of *Monster Ball 1.0*, performed in 2009, and *Monster Ball 2.0*, a version that was performed 2010-2011. In an interview, Gaga was asked what her favourite monster was. She replied: ‘I guess one of my favourite monsters is the Angler Fish – a real monster from my childhood’ (‘Interview Lady Gaga’ 2010).

¹⁶⁷ Lady Gaga’s real name is Stefani Germanotta, and she admitted to Oprah (2020) that Stefani and Lady Gaga are two identities that have merged.

female musicians who are often subjected to sexual abuse, much like Gaga was at the age of nineteen.

In a more recent interview with Oprah (2020), Gaga said that it was when she first became a star that the unresolved trauma of the sexual assault truly took hold:

...all of a sudden I became a star and was travelling the world going from hotel room to garage to limo to stage, and I never dealt with it, and then all of a sudden I started to experience this incredible intense pain throughout my entire body that mimicked, actually, the illness I felt after I was raped.

Lady Gaga speaking to Oprah (2020).

The pain Gaga experienced some years after her rape is fibromyalgia, an illness that can be triggered by an intensely stressful event (Oprah 2020). Although not fully understood, it is known to be caused by abnormal chemical levels in the brain that change the way pain messages are sent around the body (NHS 2019). For Gaga, this trauma response began after she became famous, and thus it can be deduced that this is the main source of suffering, the main ‘monster’, which inspired *The Fame Monster*. Therefore, I argue that to face her monster(s), Gaga *became* a monster.

The comparison to be drawn here with Medusa’s myth is that both women are *physically* changed after suffering some form of male violence. Both women become monsters, but unlike Medusa, Gaga does so *willingly*.

A Fan Reading of Gaga as Medusa

This notion of trauma that manifests in her work as a monster, and the subsequent manipulation of her appearance, may explain why at least one of Gaga’s fans chose to view her as Medusa in their artwork. The art piece, created by a fan named Morgan, is unique because it is accompanied by Morgan’s own reading of Gaga. Thus, while other forms of fan art will be discussed later in the chapter, it is appropriate to include an analysis of Morgan’s work here. I will also continue to use Gaga’s own words so that her voice is heard throughout my analysis.

Morgan’s reading of Gaga as Medusa was inspired by comments the pop star made in 2013, just prior to her revealing interview with Howard Stern, while performing new tracks from her album *Artpop* (2013) during the *iTunes* festival held at the Roundhouse, London. It was a gig that she referred to as ‘Swinefest’ taken from the song title ‘Swine’. As she had said to Stern (mentioned above), ‘Swine’ is about her rape, and during the performance, Gaga

told her audience that she had endured some difficult times in her life and that she uses ‘wigs



Fig. 4.1. *Artpop* album cover (2013).

and make-up’ to ‘cover up the pain’ (‘Lady Gaga Opens iTunes Festival’ 2013). Gaga indicates that her manipulation of her appearance, which largely draws on horror to give herself monstrous or alien features, is a form of escapism. Indeed, Gaga includes mythical reference to trauma and subsequent altered states in the background of her album cover for *Artpop* (fig. 4.1.). The cover was created by American artist Jeff Koons and features a naked Gaga gripping her breasts and wearing a straight blonde wig. Her legs

are apart, and between them is a Koons ‘gazing ball’ – a blue reflective sphere. The gazing ball, which has also featured in Koons’ other artworks, ‘affirms you’ and ‘your existence’ as it reflects both the spectator and the world around them (Koons speaking to *MTV*, Ehrlich 2013). As it is between Gaga’s legs, it also figuratively positions Gaga as giving birth to the spectator, for, if this was not a photograph, the spectator’s image would be reflected in the ball, as if emerging from Gaga’s vagina (this can be read as a play on Gaga’s ‘Mother Monster’ persona, the topic of the next chapter).¹⁶⁸ Behind Gaga are two famous artworks: Sandro Botticelli’s painting *The Birth of Venus* (1484-1485) and Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s marble sculpture *Apollo and Daphne* (1622-1625).¹⁶⁹ Morgan (2014), on his *Tumblr* account, had the following to say on this use of Greco-Roman mythology:

We can clearly see the themes that Gaga has been showing us all along:

Birth - Gaga giving birth to the Koons Gazing Ball/the album, The Birth of Venus

¹⁶⁸ The sphere also resembles a pearl in a scallop shell and connects Gaga with Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* (1484-1485), where the goddess stands ‘on a giant scallop shell, as pure and as perfect as a pearl’ (Uffizi n.d.). Gaga continued to dress up as Botticelli’s Venus during her promotion of this album.

¹⁶⁹ This was not the only use of Greco-Roman mythology on this album. References were scattered throughout. For example, during the song ‘Venus’ she primarily refers to the Greco-Roman goddess of love, yet also mentions every Olympian god. For the music video for another song from the album, ‘G.U.Y’, she casts presenter and gay icon Andy Cohen and the members of the *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* in a camp and classically infused video that uses the Hearst Castle in California for its setting.

Transformation - Daphne becoming a tree (to avoid Apollo's unwanted love!!!) This echoes Gaga's discussion at the iTunes festival about using wigs and outfits to become someone new, to escape the 'swine' who made her feel like trash.

Morgan (2014).

Thus, while Koons read Gaga as Apollo (quoted in Ehrlich 2013), Morgan interprets her as Daphne. In the ancient myth, as it is told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, Daphne is a nymph and a follower of the virgin goddess of the hunt, Diana (Artemis) (1.451-567). Diana's followers are also virgins, yet the god Apollo, who is also Diana's sibling, becomes enamoured with Daphne and pursues her. To escape his unwanted advances, Daphne calls to her father, a river god, pleading him to change her form, for her beauty has made her 'admired too well' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.545) and has attracted this unwanted attention (an ancient sense of victim blaming). Although her father changes her into a tree, this does not prevent Apollo from using her body for his own benefit, for he plucks her branches and her bark to create his wreath and lyre. Helen Morales thus reads Daphne's transformation, as well as other tales in Ovid's epic of violated women turning into trees and reeds, as 'imaginative dramatizations of the paralysis and dissociation caused by trauma' (2020, 69). Consequently, Morgan, in his analysis of Gaga's *Artpop* album cover, reads the pop star as Daphne for he connects the myth's themes of transformation and trauma with the comments Gaga made at the *iTunes* festival. I would also add that I believe Gaga views herself as Daphne. In the song 'Mary Jane Holland' taken from *Artpop*, Gaga sings the following: 'So if you have fear, Apollo, sit on my lyre, and play him like a piano man' ('Mary Jane Holland' 2013). Gaga is addressing Apollo, she is not the god but rather aligns herself with the lyre made from the laurel tree. The song is about smoking weed in Amsterdam, and one fan has posited that 'by smoking weed, Gaga is "turning into a tree", making her problems go away and morphing into another person' ('Mary Jane Holland – Lady Gaga' 2013).¹⁷⁰

Transformation after a sexual assault, or attempted violation, are therefore found in both Daphne and Medusa's tales, but it is *Medusa* who becomes a monster. As I have discussed, it is apparent that Morgan interprets Gaga's manipulation of her appearance as a response to some form of trauma, even if he was not yet aware that this was explicitly a rape. As Medusa also changes into a *monster* after an assault, I propose that Morgan read Gaga as

¹⁷⁰ Apollo's oracle at Delphi draws an interesting comparison here. In the ancient world, the priestess known as Pythia, would transmit the oracle's messages to those who required divine guidance. To do so, it is said that she would sit on a tripod and Apollo would communicate through her as she entered a trance (either caused by fumes entering her body or a 'self-induced trance'), all while she was wearing a crown of laurel leaves and 'shaking a laurel' (Sourvinou-Inwood, 2012).



Fig. 4.2. Morgan's reimagined *Artpop* album cover. *Tumblr*.

more aligned with the Gorgon than Daphne because of the pop star's synonymity with the monstrous, and thus why he chose to portray her as such on his version of the *Artpop* album cover (fig. 4.2.). This almost proposes a re-mythologizing of the myth. Medusa was transformed involuntarily into a monster, but Morgan is connecting her with Gaga who consciously orchestrates her appearance by adopting the monstrous as a form of escapism. Thus, on Morgan's re-envisioned album cover, Gaga is shown in the same seated position as the original,

but the myths that had been shown in the background are replaced with snakeskin, and Gaga has green eyes that are snake-like and resemble the eyes Ray Harryhausen used for his creation of the clay-model Medusa in *Clash of the Titans* (1981). The straight blonde wig Gaga wore in the original is also replaced with white dreadlocked hair, the type that Gaga frequently wore during *Artpop*'s promotion, and which can be read as Medusa-like as the locks resemble snakes (as discussed in chapter one of this thesis in relation to African hair and Black women's identification with the Gorgon). Morgan has also removed the Koons gazing ball and replaced it with the *Versace* logo of Medusa's head. It is the use of Medusa's head between the legs, and covering her vulva, which is significant as it strongly evokes the *vagina dentata*, the castrating female genitals. The concept of the *vagina dentata* will be discussed below, but it is clear that Morgan views Gaga as a Medusa figure because of the pop star's appropriation of the monstrous to manipulate her appearance and as a way of escaping 'swine'.

Drawing from Gaga's comments and Morgan's reading, I argue that Gaga can be viewed as a Medusa-like figure who transforms into the monstrous after some form of male violence. Unlike Medusa, however, Gaga transforms *herself* into a monster and has clear agency. Talking to *Stern* about her rape, Gaga stated: 'I wasn't even willing to admit that anything had even happened ... I don't want to be defined by it,' she said. 'I'll be damned if somebody's going to say that every creatively intelligent thing that I ever did is all boiled

down to one d—head that did that to me. I’m going to take responsibility for all my pain looking beautiful ... I did that’ (talking to Stern, quoted by McDonald 2014). Gaga’s monster is much more than a response to the trauma caused by her abuser. I contend that Gaga’s rape by a music producer is part of a much broader picture of the male violence inherent in the music industry and that by becoming a monster, Gaga has autonomous creative control over her image and empowers herself as a woman.

The Music Industry as Monster

Male sexual violence is an attempt to violate women’s personhood and break their spirit, and it is rife within this male-dominated industry. Even Gaga says that her ‘Bad Romance’ (2009) video and lyrics, which will form the basis of my analysis alongside *The Fame Monster* below, is a commentary on women’s bodies being treated as a commodity in the music business: ‘how the entertainment industry can, in a metaphorical way, simulate human trafficking – products being sold, the woman perceived as a commodity’ (quoted in Powers 2009). The toxic culture within the industry is conducive for men who abuse their positions of power to exploit female (and male) performers, and this extends beyond Gaga (Smith et al 2020). Male film and music producers have repeatedly been exposed as abusers and accused of sexual misconduct directed towards predominantly female celebrities early in their career, and examples range from disgraced film producer Harvey Weinstein, Alfred Hitchcock (Hedren 2016), to music producer and alleged rapist of the pop star Kesha, Dr Luke (Lockett, Gordon, and Zahn 2021). I argue that by transforming into a monster, Gaga asserts agency over her body as a female pop star. As I have mentioned in the Introduction, women have repeatedly been demonised through an association with the monstrous-feminine and are often constructed as having dangerous bodies that need to be brought under control by a hero, as exemplified by Medusa. I argue that Gaga plays on these fears for her own advantage. Through an analysis of ‘Bad Romance’ below, where Gaga refers to herself as a monster for the first time, I contend that Gaga’s plays to male fears of the female body to subvert power dynamics and to situate the men in her music video, which as I shall discuss below symbolise the music business, as victims. In doing so, Gaga subverts the monstrous-feminine by transforming it into a positive and empowering female symbol for the marginalised and the oppressed, and in the process creates her own narrative and establishes herself as the creative director of her own work and image.

Therefore, unlike the Gorgon who is given her monstrous identity by male writers and by a goddess who often sides herself with male authority (see Deacy 1997), Gaga shows a level of agency where she willingly becomes a monster who is not subjugated but thrives. This notion of a monstrous woman with agency is discussed by Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993). Creed critiques and builds upon Freud's reading of Medusa as symbolising the castrated female genitals, to argue that Medusa represents the *castrating* woman: the vagina dentata. This she applies to horror film to argue that women onscreen, contrary to Mulvey's assertion, can take an active role. As Gaga is inspired by horror film (Gaga quoted in Gray 2012, 5), I suggest that Creed's Medusa is useful for reading Gaga's first use of the monstrous, and to argue that the two figures do not just become monsters after experiencing some form of male violence but become *castrating* monsters. As a monster with agency and control over her work, Gaga stands in contrast to the music industry that seeks to take it away.

Vagina Dentata

Barbara Creed suggests that male fears of the female body stem from the infantile belief that the mother's genitals are castrating. Evidence for the belief of a vagina with teeth are found in various myths across different cultures, and Creed argues that the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud found such evidence in his research but instead ignored this to argue that the male imagination views women as castrated.¹⁷¹ Therefore, Creed reconsiders two of Sigmund Freud's works that he used to support this theory of the castrated mother: the case study of Little Hans (1909) and 'Medusa's Head' (1922).¹⁷² In the latter, as has been discussed, Freud read Medusa's head as symbolic of the mother's 'castrated' genitals and used the myth as further evidence for his Oedipus Complex. While this has been adopted by some film theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Creed suggests a reconsideration of Freud's essay to position women in active, rather than passive, terms.

¹⁷¹ Erich Neumann in *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (1949) proposed that Medusa was the Terrible Mother with a castrating womb. In *The Great Mother: An Analysis of an Archetype* (1972), he argues that 'the motif of the vagina dentata is most distinct in the mythology of the North American Indians' and mentions one where a 'meat-eating fish inhabits the vagina of the Terrible Mother' (2015, 168).

There is another prominent female monster from Greek myth who can also be read as a vagina dentata: *Scylla*. Although like many other female monsters, *Scylla* is subject to change, she was often described as a good-looking woman, yet her body, below her waist, consisted of several dogs (Apollodorus states six in number, *Bibliotheca* E7.20-21), open mouthed and waiting to bite.

¹⁷² The case study of Little Hans can be found in Freud's paper 'Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy' (1909).

Rather than Medusa reflecting male anxiety of the castrated mother and the castrating father, Creed suggests that Medusa's snake hair, gaping mouth, and fanged teeth are suggestive of the castrating female genitals: 'The Medusa's entire visage is alive with images of toothed vaginas, poised and waiting to strike. No wonder her male victims were rooted to the spot with fear' (Creed 1993a, 111). Moreover, the snake is a bisexual symbol with the tail (phallus) in the mouth (vagina), yet Freud disregards the vaginal association of the snake and focuses exclusively on the penis. This is not the only case where Freud has omitted the idea of a castrating woman. Creed cites Freud's 'The Sexual Theories of Children' (1908) where he argues that the male child's sight of menstrual blood on the bed sheets of his parents leads him to believe that his father has castrated his mother and that the blood is from this wound, or even that the father caused the bleeding during intercourse (Freud 1908, 386). Creed instead argues that the blood on the bed sheets, which appears monthly, may be taken by the child as the injury caused by the mother's vagina during sex (Creed 1993a, 112).

Creed's re-reading of Freud's analysis of Medusa challenges Laura Mulvey's use of Freudian theory. As has repeatedly been mentioned, Mulvey argued that cinema, because it reflects patriarchal society, serves the purpose of assuaging male castration anxiety by depicting women as passive images to be fetishized by the male gaze. Creed argues that Mulvey's theory is reductive because it does not consider horror films where the male's imagination has 'given rise to two of the most powerful representations of the monstrous-feminine in the horror film: woman as castrator and woman as castrated', and is a genre that does not serve the purpose of assuaging male castration anxiety because male victims onscreen often become literally castrated (Creed 1993a, 122).¹⁷³ Further, Creed uses the vagina dentata to argue that women in horror films are not always passive victims; thus the passive and active dichotomy that Mulvey posited is again deconstructed as women can take active positions as castrators. This has significant implications for the way monstrous women can be read onscreen and, I argue, can be used to read Lady Gaga's monster.

Lady Gaga as Femme Castratrice

For Creed, there are various ways in which the vagina dentata can manifest itself onscreen. One is the vagina dentata as 'symbolic expression' of the oral sadistic mother, the mother who wishes to feed on the infant just as the infant feeds on her (symbolised by the feeding female vampire) (Creed 1993a, 109). Another is the dyadic mother, who threatens to

¹⁷³ This does not mean that the fetish is not at work. The female body still threatens, but in different terms.

symbolically consume the child's identity (this is the overbearing mother; Creed gives the example of Mrs. Bates in *Psycho*, 1960) (1993a, 109). Additionally, there is the *femme castratrice*, the woman who literally castrates men who have harmed her. As I will argue below, it is the *femme castratrice* to whom I propose Lady Gaga most adheres. The *femme castratrice* is usually, but not always, a victim of rape, and, in cases where she is not a rape victim, she is the subject of 'some form of male exploitation' (Creed 1993a, 123). The *femme castratrice* seeks revenge on the men who have harmed her, and Creed gives the film *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) as an example. In this film, the female protagonist is subjected to a brutal rape by a group of men, and she takes her revenge by seducing and murdering these men one by one. Castration is symbolised by her use of an axe to mutilate the men's bodies, and she *literally* castrates one of her attackers in a bathtub with a knife as her victim reaches orgasm. That the *femme castratrice* uses seduction to trap her victims is important. As Creed says, 'woman is monstrous because she castrates, or kills, the male during coition' (1993a, 129). Yet, the *femme castratrice* in horror is rarely punished, for her actions are portrayed as justified (Creed 1993a, 123).¹⁷⁴ Therefore, in films where women are monstrous because they castrate, male castration anxiety is not assuaged, it is intensified. As Creed states: 'Man must be ever on the alert, poised in phallic anticipation whenever signs of the deadly *femme castratrice* are present' (Creed 1993a, 138).

I suggest that Creed's use of Medusa to frame her suggestion of the vagina dentata is significant for an examination of Lady Gaga, who I argue becomes a castrating monster in her music video 'Bad Romance' (2009), and where, for the first time, Gaga explicitly refers to herself as a 'monster'. Here, Gaga is exploited and sex trafficked by the Russian mafia, and to punish them she uses seduction and castration, thus pointing to Gaga's role as a *femme castratrice*. The video is directed by Francis Lawrence, but Gaga stresses that the work was 'collaborative' (Vena 2009a). Further, as Gaga writes her own music, and her use of the monstrous is such an integral part of her work, it is clear that she has creative control. Therefore, if woman as castrator is a product of the male imagination, what are we to make of a woman who willingly becomes the castrator onscreen herself?

To explore this, I will give a deeper analysis of the various ways in which vagina dentata symbolism is found in the 'Bad Romance' video. Vagina dentata symbolism can include animals and weapons, as well as explicit reference or depiction of castration.

¹⁷⁴ Note that this contrasts with monstrous women who are castrated and thus punished (Creed 1993a, 122-123).

Whereas the video, as will shortly be discussed, contains such images, the song's lyrics describe a different type of monstrosity that is distinct from traditional notions of horror as the song's theme is that of an unhealthy romantic relationship: a bad romance. Although there is little emphasis on horror, and thus no real use of the *vagina dentata*, the lyrics do reference several of Alfred Hitchcock's horrors and thrillers, and these are used as rather unsubtle references to sex: 'I want your *psycho*, your *vertigo* stick, want you in my *rear window*...' ('Bad Romance' 2009, emphasis my own).¹⁷⁵ Horror and castration in the video are much more explicit. The video begins with Gaga sitting on a throne, surrounded by her dancers, and wearing razorblade sunglasses. Gaga's statement regarding these glasses is particularly interesting:

'I wanted to design a pair for some of the toughest chicks and some of my girlfriends – don't do this at home! – they used to keep razor blades in the side of their mouths', she explained. 'That tough female spirit is something that I want to project. It's meant to be, "This is my shield, this is my weapon, this is my inner sense of fame, this is my monster"'.
Lady Gaga, quoted in Vena (2009a).

The razorblades in the mouth already prophesise the later use of castration in the video, with the mouth concealing sharp objects used to *cut*.¹⁷⁶ Using weapons to protect oneself as a woman is what Gaga refers to as *her* monster. This suggests that Gaga's monster is a 'shield' and used as a form of defence. This, I suggest, clearly shows that Gaga's definition of a monster is re-articulated into a form of protection; it is worn as armour.

The next scene shows Gaga emerging from a coffin-like incubator that bears in red the word 'Monster' with a crucifix below it. Although there are other 'coffins' in the room, it is only Gaga's that has this self-referential term inscribed. The coffin opens and Gaga emerges wearing a white latex one-piece suit that has only a hole for her mouth. As she crawls out, she is joined by her dancers who similarly rise wearing these latex costumes, all of which have spiked tops that evoke the roots of teeth. While Gaga has a hole cut to expose her mouth, the dancers only have holes for their eyes. The dance routine that follows, and

¹⁷⁵ In order, these Hitchcock films are *Psycho* (1960), *Vertigo* (1958), and *Rear Window* (1954). All three films have their own 'bad romances', and, like most of Hitchcock's films, are heavily centred on the voyeuristic gaze of the male protagonist. Hitchcock was well known for exploring psychoanalytic drives in his narratives, and Mulvey (1975), using *Vertigo* as one of her examples, argues that woman is both the object of the sadistic voyeuristic gaze of the male who investigates her, but she is also fetishized (Mulvey 1975, 66). Gaga, in this video, arguably subverts the reading of women as passive image to the male gaze, for she commands the gaze as a castrating woman. Note that there are a number of different psychoanalytic readings of *Vertigo*, for example Paul Gordon's *Dial 'M' for Mother* (2008).

¹⁷⁶ As Jane M. Ussher notes, during the Vietnam war, American soldiers were warned about having sex with Vietnamese women who hid razorblades in their vaginas (2006, 2).

which is notably like Michael Jackson's 1983 zombie routine in *Thriller* (Owens 2014, 106), includes the claw sign that has since been adopted by fans as a symbol of the Little Monster and Mother Monster bond. The horror tropes used here, therefore, all suggest death and consumption, with zombies being cannibals who infect their victims through biting.

As the video continues, its premise becomes clearer. Gaga is shown in a bathtub with enlarged eyes, which may suggest innocence but also allude to the fact that Gaga has been drugged by two women. She is dragged from the bathtub and the top half of her body is stripped naked. The camera cuts to a separate scene where Gaga cries directly into the camera, before showing Gaga being pushed in front of a group of men (the Russian mafia) where she is, again involuntarily, stripped of her clothes and shown wearing a revealing leotard. She tries to cover herself but then begins to provocatively dance along with her backing dancers. She crawls on all fours to one of the men and straddles him while the lyrics: 'You know that I want you' are played ('Bad Romance' 2009). These men are bidding for sex with Gaga, and the video is essentially depicting sex trafficking. The man whom Gaga straddles has submitted the highest bid, yet Gaga's seductive dance and saying that *she* wants him blurs who is in charge here, who is desiring whom. As different scenes intersect, with Gaga adopting various eccentric fashion guises (and thus connecting fashion with the monstrous, for example the lyrics 'walk walk fashion baby' are paired with Gaga wearing peculiar get up), she is shown wearing a fake bat headpiece, its fangs bared while she stands bent over in a shower, her spine protruding from her back (two minutes twenty-seven) ('Bad Romance' 2009). Bats are often a mythical symbol of metamorphosis because of their connection with vampires in folklore, as evident in Bram Stoker's shape-shifting *Dracula* (*Dracula* 1897). I suggest that the bat marks a transitional period in the video, with Gaga moving from innocent victim to a vengeful 'monster' that will soon appear. I also suggest that the scene where Gaga is shown crying is also in anticipation of what she is about to do.

Animals with Bite

The bat head piece and the animal-like crawl that Gaga uses to seduce the bidders are two of many examples where Gaga aligns herself with the animal. Creed explores the animal as a symbol of the castrating female by using literary critic Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity* (1986). Dijkstra explores the use of 'cats, tigers, lions, polar bears and grizzlies' who are frequently portrayed alongside women, especially by their genital region, in early twentieth century paintings (Creed 1993a, 108). For Dijkstra, the 'jaws suggested the vagina dentata

which turn-of-the-century men feared they might find hidden beneath' a woman's dress (1986, 294). This is significant for reading Gaga's use of animals as evoking castration, which continues at around mark two minutes forty-three when a sphynx cat is shown hissing with teeth displayed, while Gaga sings 'because I'm a free bitch, baby' ('Bad Romance' 2009). 'Bitch' refers to a female dog or wolf and is also a derogative word to refer to women, and thus Gaga is aligning herself, in both the lyrics and video, with an animal but also to a misogynistic slur that she is reclaiming (it is also later repeated during the song 'Dance in the Dark' where Gaga actually becomes a wolf, discussed below).¹⁷⁷ Gaga repeats the same lyrics just before a polar bear's head is dragged along the floor with its mouth open, teeth exposed, and its carcass worn as a coat by Gaga (mark three minutes forty-five).¹⁷⁸ She pairs this outfit with what looks like a small fake rat in her hair, and the camera reveals that Gaga is now in a bedroom with the winning bidder who is sat on the bed in front of her. She drops the fur coat, revealing her white lace bra and thong.¹⁷⁹ As a fire erupts, Gaga is shown in front of the bed that has now been consumed by the flames with fur draped over her left shoulder and the polar bear's head and teeth *between* her legs as a clear symbol of the vagina dentata. In the final scene, Gaga lies on the now charred bed, her white lace underwear has turned black, and she wears a pyro-bra, the source of the fire.¹⁸⁰ The fake rat remains in her dishevelled hair, and she nonchalantly smokes a cigarette while lying next to the bidder's skeleton, his flesh and organs burnt away and his hands covering where his genitals would have been in what appears to have been a last bid attempt to save them. Gaga has turned from a victim to a seductress and a castrator, she has become the monster.¹⁸¹

Creed argues that the *femme castratrice* is monstrous because she castrates via the promise of sex. The use of sex and death in horror is even given by Lady Gaga as a direct source of inspiration for *The Fame Monster*:

¹⁷⁷ The use of the word 'bitch' has been reclaimed by women in recent years.

¹⁷⁸ This is a creation by fashion designer Benjamin Cho, and it must be noted that this is not real fur.

¹⁷⁹ The use of the fur coat may be referred to as a fetish object that distracts from her 'castrating' genitals. The fur coat as a fetish is also found in the masochistic relationship with the powerful woman, as discussed in Gilles Deleuze's reading of *Venus in Furs* (see previous chapter). However, this speaks to pre-Oedipal desires, rather than Oedipal, and thus the fetish slightly differs.

¹⁸⁰ The pyro-brassiere also evokes the bad breast, or the bad mother, as will be discussed in relation to Melanie Klein in the next chapter.

¹⁸¹ This scene is particularly camp. Gaga looks dazed but not particularly perturbed by what has just happened. The use of camp and the vagina dentata, and a possible influence for Gaga's video, is the 2007 film *Teeth*. In this film, a young girl with teeth in her vagina repeatedly castrates her rapists. The source of horror is so exaggerated that the 'camp aesthetics enable the film to distinguish between an endorsement of nondiegetic violence against men versus a subversive critique of phallocentrism enacted through hyperbolic and supernatural portrayals of castration' (Kelly 2016, 93).

I have an obsession with death and sex. Those two things are also the nexus of horror films, which I've been obsessing over lately... My re-release is called *The Fame Monster* so I've just been sort of bulimically eating and regurgitating monster movies and all things scary.

Gaga quoted in Gray 2012, 5.¹⁸²

I suggest that Gaga's love of horror films has led her to consciously draw on a horror trope to make a commentary. I also suggest that the Russian mafia in 'Bad Romance' are synonymous with the fame monster that emerges onstage during *The Monster Ball Tour 2.0*. Both remove her clothes and attempt to exploit her, and both are killed by Gaga's pyro-bra, although onstage Gaga can enlist the help of her Little Monsters. The fame monster that is shown onstage, as discussed above, can be read as the music industry or media that scrutinises others but cannot survive scrutiny itself (Davisson 2013, 34). Gaga was exploited by the music industry when she was raped by a music producer at the age of nineteen and it was only when she began to become famous that this trauma re-emerged and served as inspiration for *The Fame Monster*. This leads to a reading of the 'Bad Romance' video as the music industry that seeks to exploit her again, as corroborated by Gaga's explanation of the human trafficking within the video being symbolic of women as commodities within the industry (Powers 2009, quoted above).¹⁸³ However, in this video, Gaga is not the same as she was when she was nineteen; she will not let history repeat itself. Thus, she becomes the monster as a form of defence, and this is where she draws her power. This is supported by her comments above in relation to the razorblade sunglasses: 'This is my shield, this is my weapon, this is my inner sense of fame, this is my monster' (Lady Gaga quoted in Vena 2009a). Again, Gaga has re-articulated the monster by creating this distinction between 'good' and 'bad' monsters, with Gaga becoming a (good) monster, a powerful female figure, who defeats the (bad) monster. She has played to male fears of the female body to create her own monstrous narrative.

¹⁸² Death and sex, also referred to as Thanatos and Eros (both names derive from Greek mythology. Thanatos personified death, while Eros was the Greek god of love and sex), are two drives found in Freudian theory (see *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920). Freud argues, contrary to his previous arguments, that individuals are motivated by more than just pleasure. Rather, there is a battle between the death and sex drive, where one seeks to find pleasure, but also wants to return, as Freud says, 'to the inanimate' i.e., to a time of nonexistence (death) (Freud 1920, 78). This is arguably present in the horror film. For example, see the next chapter on the abject mother who evokes both pleasure and life-giving qualities with threat and consumption of her offspring's identity (death).

¹⁸³ This also draws comparison with Madonna, who likely used the character of the businessman in 'Express Yourself' to similarly shed light on the abusive and male-centric music industry.

Spectatorial Pleasure: Gaga's Little Monsters

While the appropriation of the monstrous can be viewed as a form of empowerment for Gaga, the monstrous is also a way of appealing to her audience. Gaga's monster has changed the way celebrities communicate with fans, and while fans often view stars as akin to gods, Gaga is viewed as both a monster and a deity. Gaga has thus pioneered a new form of celebrity worship and it is a clever tactic that ensures she retains agency over herself and her creativity, while still appealing to her audience. I argue that Creed's horror film theory that uses Medusa can be applied to Gaga's monstrous-feminine within 'Bad Romance' to give an analysis of the different modes of spectatorial pleasure at play and to explore how exactly Gaga's monster seduces the gaze of her audience. As has been mentioned, Gaga has re-articulated the monstrous and re-defined it as a form of empowerment and protection. This could clearly appeal to female spectators who may feel empowered by watching a woman subjugate a man onscreen. Yet, why would this appeal to male viewers who are watching a narrative that clearly plays to male fears regarding the female body and does not serve as a source of mitigation for those fears? A further investigation of Creed's work on the *femme castratrice* in film sheds light on this.

For Creed, the *femme castratrice* has significant consequences for readings of women in horror and modes of cinematic identification offered to female spectators. Firstly, in films where women are physically mutilating male bodies, especially rape-revenge films, it is not just women's bodies which symbolically evoke castration anxiety in male spectators, but the male's castrated body *literally*. Further, if male and female bodies evoke castration anxiety in male spectators, then it is not just women who are subject to a 'male gaze' onscreen. For the women in the audience, although devoid of castration anxiety themselves, can gaze and enjoy these films because there is identification available with the castrating woman. As mentioned above, this enables female spectators to vicariously play out their fantasy of punishing men and experience a sense of empowerment from these films. As Creed says, it is the *femme castratrice* who 'controls the sadistic gaze: the male victim is her object' (1993a, 153), thus contrary to Mulvey's assertion, women *can* possess the gaze. The woman as castrator plays with the idea of the vagina as a source of pleasure but also danger, and may appeal to male spectators who can take perverse enjoyment in watching female monsters being violent

towards their onscreen counterpart (Creed 1993a, 154-5).¹⁸⁴ Unlike the masochistic pleasures that the vamp or the femme fatale evokes, as discussed in the previous chapter, the awareness of sexual difference and fear of the female genitals plays to Oedipal frustrations. Here, Gaga as a *femme castratrice*, who seduces and castrates, evokes fear and desire.

Further, male spectators can also identify with Gaga as a monster. The monster in film often serves as the symbol of the Other and this stems from the monster of gothic literature that embodied societal fears. As a symbol of the Other, the monster can represent fears of the female, the queer, the foreigner, or even the political other. As Jeffrey J. Cohen states in his influential 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)': 'One kind of difference becomes another as the normative categories of gender, sexuality, national identity, and ethnicity slide together like the imbricated circles of a Venn diagram, abjecting from the center that which becomes the monster' (Cohen 1996, 11). The monster is defeated again and again in order to restore the boundaries it crosses and to restore the status quo. It is for this reason that Harry M. Benshoff argues that 'the cinematic monster's subjective position is more readily acceded to by a queer viewer – someone who already situates him/herself outside a patriarchal, heterosexist order and the popular culture texts it produces' (2015, 125). Benshoff is arguing that there is an identification available with the monster for those who are 'queer', queer being defined in terms of those who feel ostracised in society and not just because of sexual orientation (2015, 119).

Therefore, Gaga, as a monstrous castrating woman who takes her revenge, can be identified with by those spectators who feel vulnerable and disempowered, and who, in their Otherness, find in Gaga a positive symbol of the Other who fights back.¹⁸⁵ Gaga as a queer icon is explored more in the subsequent chapter, but it must be noted that, even when monsters embody an amalgamation of various fears, the monster is repeatedly feminised and aligned with the female body. Even the male monster is feminised as a penetrating and secreting figure (Creed 1993b, 118). The horror genre thus reveals male anxieties regarding female bodies more so than any other film category. It shows that woman's construction as a

¹⁸⁴ As mentioned, horror films play with the fears and desires surrounding sex and death. Male spectators may take pleasure in watching the male onscreen being punished and killed because it appeals to their death drive (see footnote 182).

¹⁸⁵ The idea of cross-gendered identification in the horror film is also proposed by Carol J. Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (1992). She argues that the male spectator can masochistically identify with the tormented 'Final Girl' who becomes phallicized (via weaponry) to take her revenge on the male sadist. The issue here for Creed, however, is that Clover deems the final girl of the slasher film as phallicized rather than castrating (Creed 1993a, 126-7). For Creed, the final girl of the slasher film cannot be both, she is simply the 'deadly *femme castratrice*' (Creed 1993a, 127).

monster stems from the male imagination regarding sexual difference. I suggest that Gaga has drawn on these male fears and manipulated her image to her advantage to empower herself, particularly by mythically playing out her revenge on a man who is attempting to violate her. I also suggest that the use of the *femme castratrice* is pleasurable to watch for both male and female, but also extends beyond gender to those who are non-binary and to those spectators who feel ‘Other’ or powerless in some way. As those who are ostracised in society more readily identify with monsters, in Gaga they can finally identify with a figure who is not punished at the end of the narrative but is triumphant. Thus, not only is Gaga in control of her image, so are her fans who own who they are and feel pride in their identity as ‘outsiders’. While such fans may have experienced insults and forms of bullying for their perceived ‘difference’, inspired by Gaga, they are taking charge of their image via this reclamation of the monstrous. This empowering effect of Gaga on her fans’ identities will be discussed further in the following chapter in relation to Gaga’s maternal role as Mother Monster.

In summary, the premise of the ‘Bad Romance’ music video is about drawing on the monstrous to regain control of the body and to inflict violence on men who symbolise the music industry. Gaga uses her vulnerability and transforms it into a spectacle that infuses camp with horror to play to male fears of the female body and of retribution. But Gaga does not simply play to male fears. By subverting power dynamics through an appropriation of the monstrous-feminine, she empowers herself as a woman as well as her fans. This continues throughout *The Fame Monster* album where, I argue, Gaga *re-writes* the monster and subverts existing monstrous narratives to challenge power dynamics and to assert feminine agency.

The Fame Monster: Comparative Study

In *The Fame Monster* EP, the theme of sex and transformation continues throughout in relation to bestiality and biting, and Gaga seems to gradually become more monstrous as the album progresses. Track one is ‘Bad Romance’ where, as I have mentioned, *lyrically* there is little to suggest the monstrous. In track three, however, the song titled ‘Monster’ clearly details Gaga fighting away a male monster who is a wolf. Gaga sings:

That boy is bad, And honestly,
he’s a wolf in disguise
...He licked his lips, Said to me,
‘Girl, you look good enough to eat.’
...Put his arms around me,

Said, 'Boy, no, get your paws right off me'
'Monster' (2009).

As has been mentioned, Gaga says that the album deals with each one of her fears (her monsters). Gaga explained that this song represented her fear of sex: 'I keep falling in love with the monster' (qtd. in Vena 2009c). The song clearly references the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*, a connection that has already been established by literary critic Jennifer M. Woolston ('Lady Gaga and the Wolf' 2012).¹⁸⁶ Woolston argues that *The Fame Monster* as a whole can be read as inspired by the fairy tale but that 'Gaga addresses, challenges, and ultimately revises' it (Woolston 2012, 110). *Little Red Riding Hood* has repeatedly been re-written and adapted over centuries and one of the earliest known versions is called 'The Story of the Grandmother' where the young girl climbs naked into bed with the disguised wolf (Marshall 2004, 263).¹⁸⁷ Interestingly, in this very early version, the girl saves *herself*. After realising that she is not in bed with her grandmother, the girl makes the excuse that she must go to the toilet. The wolf ties a rope to her so that she will not run away, but the girl cuts the rope and escapes.¹⁸⁸ To quote Marshall's analysis of the tale: 'Here, it could be argued that Little Red's feminine body invites the sexual advances of the wolf; however, it is that same excessive body through which she frees herself' (Marshall 2004, 263). Yet, it is Charles Perrault's (1697) and Brothers Grimm's (1812, who instead call their tale 'Little Red Cap') versions that have become the best-known.¹⁸⁹ Both versions give very different endings to 'The Story of the Grandmother'. In Perrault's version, the young girl is killed and eaten (read: raped) by the wolf, in contrast with the Grimm's story where the young girl is eaten but saved by a huntsman who cuts open the wolf's belly. Interestingly, Perrault ends his tale with the following:

Moral: One sees here that young children, especially young girls, pretty, well brought-up, and gentle, should never listen to anyone who happens by, and if this occurs, it is not so strange when the wolf should eat them. I say the wolf, for all wolves are not of the same kind. There are some with winning ways, not loud, nor bitter, or angry, who are tame, good-natured, and pleasant and follow young ladies right into their homes,

¹⁸⁶ Gaga has been quoted elsewhere as using the monster in her work to turn it into a 'fairy tale' (qtd. in Woolston 2012, 121). The monster she is referring to is 'celebrity culture' (Woolston 2012, 121). Therefore, she is alluding to the way in which celebrity culture can become a powerful force by using the monster to challenge the status-quo and to be a positive influence on her fans.

¹⁸⁷ Graham Anderson argues that the fairy tale has ancient precedents in Pausanias' tale of Euthymus and Lykas (6.6.7.-11) (Anderson 2000, 94-96).

¹⁸⁸ Cutting appears to be quite symbolic here and suggestive of the young girl's ability to save herself with a concealed weapon, much like the 'cutting' of the vagina dentata.

¹⁸⁹ Perrault based his tale on 'The Story of the Grandmother' (Marshall 2004, 263).

right into their alcoves. But alas for those who do not know that of all the wolves the docile ones are those who are most dangerous.
Perrault 1697, 93.

Perrault has manipulated the tale as a warning to young girls not to talk to men or they may be raped.¹⁹⁰ Even in Brothers Grimm, the young girl is at fault as she strays from the path after her mother told her not to leave it.¹⁹¹

Blame in both cases is placed on the girl for not protecting her chastity by talking to strangers or straying from the path, and the feminine sexuality hinted at in 'The Story of the Grandmother' has been removed. Whereas blame is placed on the young girl in these versions of the tale that warns young girls not to talk to strange men, Woolston notes that in 'Monster' Gaga does not heed such warnings from these male authors (Woolston 2012, 116). Gaga gently suggests that the eventual sexual encounter with her 'wolf' in 'Monster' may not be fully consensual: 'I wanna just dance, but he took me home instead, Uh-oh, there was a monster in my bed' ('Monster' 2009). However, this rather alludes to Gaga being seduced and leading with her heart and not her brain, two organs that the monster later eats in the song: 'He ate my heart and then he ate my brain' ('Monster' 2009). Eating is also used as a sexual euphemism, as both 'you look good enough to eat' and 'he ate my heart out' ('Monster' 2009) suggest cunnilingus. Gaga injects the fairy tale with female desire, especially when she mentions in the song that she cannot remember if the monster was someone she had already slept with. Thus, Woolston reads Gaga as adhering to Hélène Cixous' urge for women to write and release their libidinal desires, for she is writing her own version of the tale as she writes her own lyrics (2012, 108).

The next song after 'Monster' is associated with the mouth and is called 'Speechless'. Woolston reads this as Gaga being transformed into a werewolf after having sexual relations with the wolf, as she is now devoid of speech and makes sounds throughout the song that imitate a howl (Woolston 2012, 116). However, the subject of this song is not one of Lady Gaga's real or fictitious lovers, but her *father*. Gaga wrote the song when she became increasingly worried about her father's health while she was on tour (Vena 2009b), and thus I

¹⁹⁰ The story according to Elizabeth Marshall (2004) reflects real French concerns regarding female modesty among the upper class (2004, 263), thus, (as I mentioned in the Introduction) Jack Zipes says, myths and fairy tales are similar because they are 'historically and culturally coded' (1994, 4). Therefore, it becomes problematic when only certain versions are retold through the years that are entrenched with misogynistic gender ideals from the time they were written. Female writers should challenge these and re-write them from a female perspective, as Cixous advocates.

¹⁹¹ 'Little Red Cap thought to herself: Never again in your life will you stray by yourself into the woods when your mother has forbidden it' (Grimm and Grimm 1812, 137).

would suggest that Woolston's reading is a little tenuous. Gaga does, however, explicitly become a wolf in the next track 'Dance in the Dark': 'Run, run her kiss is a vampire grin, The moon lights her way while she's howlin' at him' ('Dance in the Dark' 2009).¹⁹²

Transformation into a wolf happens neither in Perrault's nor Brothers Grimm's tales, but it is found in Angela Carter's re-telling of the fairy tale: 'The Company of Wolves' (found in Carter's collection of short stories *The Bloody Chamber* 1979, and adapted for film in 1984). Oddly, this is a connection that Woolston does not make. In Carter's story, the young female protagonist is akin to the young girl found in 'The Story of the Grandmother' as she saves herself and refuses to be a victim. When confronted with the wolf, the girl in the book (who remains nameless, although called Rosaleen in the film) takes off her clothes (at the wolf's request), and when the wolf utters the infamous line: 'All the better to eat you with', she laughs: 'she knew she was nobody's meat' and takes his shirt off (Carter 1979, 138).¹⁹³ The tale ends with the girl in bed with the wolf, 'picking the lice from his pelt' and eating them (Carter 1979, 138-9). The girl has joined the wolf in his animalistic behaviour, and the film takes this scene even further as Rosaleen literally transforms into a wolf.¹⁹⁴ In both cases, the girl reverses modes of desire and saves herself. The animal therefore signifies female desire, that repressed libido that is finally allowed to be expressed in fairy tale (Snowden 2010, 173). This subverts Perrault's and Brothers Grimm's versions where: 'the girl in the encounter with

¹⁹² Interestingly, wolves and vampires can be connected with Medusa as 'menstrual monsters'. Several scholars have argued that Medusa is frequently associated with menstruation. Creed uses Phillip Slater's 'The Glory of Hera' (1968), where he says that 'in some tribes, it is believed that the glance of a menstruating woman will, like the glance of Medusa, turn a man to stone' (Slater 1968, 68). There is various evidence in the ancient world that point to the mystery and powers of menstrual blood, and this has led Marie Mulvey-Roberts in 'Menstrual Misogyny and Taboo: The Medusa, Vampire and the Female Stigmatic' (2005) to suggest that Medusa is a figure from mythology onto whom anxieties surrounding menstruation have been displaced (2005, 149). Further, according to Shuttle and Redgrove (1978), there is an etymological connection between 'Gorgon' and the moon (1978, 262). The Latin origin of menstruation is 'moon change', and thus Mulvey-Roberts also highlights how it is interesting that Perseus defeats Medusa through looking at his shield, a 'moon-like surface' (2005, 152). This connection with menstruation and the moon also points to werewolves and the vampire. Rebecca Munford mentions Bram Stoker's use of Medusa to describe Lucy Westenra who, according to Munford, is also a 'menstrual monster' (Munford 2005, 262). It is thus a continuation of menstrual blood as a source of disgust and taboo, mentioned further in the subsequent chapter.

¹⁹³ A comparison can be drawn here with Lady Gaga who became a literal piece of meat when she wore her now famous 'meat dress' at the *MTV Video Music Awards*. As she said to Ellen DeGeneres: 'If we don't stand up for what we believe in and if we don't fight for our rights, pretty soon we're going to have as much rights as the meat on our own bones. And, I am not a piece of meat' (qtd. in Woolston 2012, 112). However, Gaga becomes a piece of 'meat' in the song 'Teeth' (also on *The Fame Monster*) by singing: 'Just want your sex (want your sex), Take a bite of my bad girl meat (bad girl meat)' ('Teeth' 2009). It is used in a sexual way, where Gaga is still in control but invites her lover, who Woolston continues to read as the wolf, to bite her. Note that Woolston makes an error in her analysis of this song by assuming a music video for 'Teeth' uploaded to *YouTube* was the official one made by Gaga (Woolston 2012, 120). This is incorrect. There is no official music video that has been made for this song. The video Woolston refers to is a fan-made video by The Gagaettes (The Gagaettes 2011).

¹⁹⁴ It must be added that the film is shot like a dream sequence. The *Little Red Riding Hood* tale is the dream, yet the end shows the wolves breaking into reality, bursting through the windows of Rosaleen's childhood bedroom potentially alluding to her progression into adolescence.

the wolf gazes but really does not gaze, for she is the image of male desire' (Zipes 1993, 379). Jack Zipes uses Jacques Lacan to argue that the girl is a mirror, one that confirms to the wolf that she is the object of his desire, the object of his gaze, but she does not reciprocate the look, it is *her* identity that will be 'violated; and fully absorbed' (Zipes 1993, 379). Therefore, as Snowden says, in Carter's versions, the young girl refutes Laura Mulvey's claim that women are to be gazed at and denied desire (Snowden 2010, 173). Here, Rosaleen returns the gaze, not just to mirror the wolf's desire back onto him, but with her own libidinal yearning.

Re-writing the better-known versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* by inserting female desire is also true for Gaga's 'Dance in the Dark'. The song is essentially about a woman who is self-conscious about her appearance and therefore turns the lights off when she has sex with her partner: 'she doesn't want her man to see her naked. She *will* be free, and she will let her inner animal out, but only when all the lights are out' ('Gaga Wisdom: Words from the Lady, Part 2' 2009).¹⁹⁵ Gaga thus connects the animal, the wolf, with female desire while trying to avoid the scrupulous male gaze that critiques her appearance. Yet, this use of the wolf does not lose its subversive potential. In the film adaptation of *The Company of Wolves*, Rosaleen's grandmother warns her with tales of women and werewolves, where 'all men are beasts and women are responsible for inciting their beastliness/lust and must bear the consequences' (Snowden 2010, 171). The grandmother is carrying on this tradition of blaming women for the actions and 'animal' drives of men that is inherent in Perrault and Grimm's tales. It is interesting here to add that predatory men in the entertainment industry who exploit young artists have also been referred to as wolves. In 1953, Marilyn Monroe's experience of sexual harassment in the industry was put into writing by Florabel Muir in an article called 'Wolves I Have Known' for *Motion Picture and Television Magazine*. Monroe said: 'But in Hollywood we have to work overtime to outwit the wolves. That's because wolves of all varieties come from far and near to snare the little Red Riding Hood of the movies' (Monroe 1953, 62). She describes the various ways wolves have approached her, and the tactics she uses to escape their clutches, such as feigning a headache (Monroe 1953, 62).

¹⁹⁵ This reveals her multifaceted female identity. She is empowered yet vulnerable. Gaga alludes to how her vulnerability and honesty in this song can lead to a powerful moment when shared live with her fans:

What I'm saying is: "I get it. I feel you, I feel the same way, and it's OK". I hope and pray that I can inspire some sort of change in people subliminally through the show. They're singing "Dance in the Dark," but they're dancing and they're free, they're letting it out. But the songs are not about freedom, they're about [the fact that] I get it. I feel the way you feel.

'Gaga Wisdom: Words from the Lady, Part 2' 2009.

Therefore, it is also about a collective liberation.

In doing so, she highlights the dark and dangerous underbelly of the industry, while also, in her own way, manipulates the wolf. She concludes the article with the following:

Whether a girl survives among a pack of wolves is entirely on her. If she is trying to get something for nothing she often winds up giving more than she bargained for. If she plays the game straight she can usually avert unpleasant situations and she gains the respect of even the wolves.
Monroe 1953, 62.

Monroe places the blame exclusively on the predatory wolf and not the little red riding hoods of Hollywood, while also advocating for female agency in order to outwit these men.

Similarly, in her version of the story, Carter takes away the sense of blame that has been propagated in previous incarnations of the fairy tale. In Perrault's version, for example, the red hood symbolises that the young girl is of menstruating age, but it is also the colour of sin, thus in Carter's version she 'rejects this misogynist and essential connection of blood/red/sex/violence that is supposed to shame Little Red Riding Hood' (Snowden 2010, 170). This is achieved by explicitly aligning the hood in the text simply with menstrual blood: 'her scarlet shawl...the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses...she ceased to be afraid' (Carter 1979, 138). I would also suggest here that the burning of the shawl at this point in the book, when the girl throws it in the fire, also marks her loss of virginity that she is not afraid or scared to 'lose'. Carter thus inserts female desire and disconnects the blame placed on the red riding hood figure. This has implications for reading Gaga as a victim of the music industry who had felt that she was to blame after her rape: 'Because of the way that I dress, and the way that I'm provocative as a person, I thought that I had brought it on myself in some way', she said. 'That it was my fault' (Lady Gaga, qtd in Hendicott 2015). Victim blaming in rape cases is a widespread problem that places onus for the attack on the female victim rather than on the male aggressor and is apparent in our most well-known fairy tales and myths (indeed, in both Medusa and Daphne's tales, the women are punished). In Perrault's and Granny's tale in Carter's film adaptation, it is women who turn men into attacking wolf rapists. Both Gaga and Rosaleen subvert this by becoming the animal and thus, like Monroe, remove the blame placed on women while revelling in their sexuality. Therefore, 'Dance in the Dark', although revealing Gaga's insecurities and vulnerability, also shows her multifaceted identity as a woman who asserts her right to sexual agency.

The wolf can also be taken as symbolic of the vagina dentata, and Creed briefly refers to this regarding Perrault and Grimm's versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* where the wolf

masquerades as Grandma, and further reads the red hood as the clitoris (1993a, 108).¹⁹⁶ Gaga in ‘Dance in the Dark’ also establishes the link with the vagina dentata by singing about vampires and werewolves (quoted above), two figures often connected in folklore. The wolf as a symbol of the vagina dentata is especially evident in a much later photoshoot where Gaga wears a jockstrap with a wolf’s head covering her vulva, the teeth open ready to bite (uploaded on Lady Gaga’s *Instagram* [@ladygaga] on the fifteenth of August 2018).¹⁹⁷ In *The Fame Monster* (which can be read as a continuous narrative), Gaga is again changed because of an initial sexual encounter with a male monster, in this case a wolf, into a castrating monster herself. By transforming into a wolf, she continues to evoke the vagina dentata that is found in ‘Bad Romance’ while continuing to re-articulate the monstrous as a form of empowerment, for she becomes a monster that has been used in fairy tales to suppress female desire and has made young girls afraid of their own bodies. Thus, rather than taking fairy tales as mirror images of society that reflect truths (much in the same way I argued stereotypes work in the prior chapter), Gaga, like Angela Carter, *shatters* the mirror.¹⁹⁸

Additionally, and as has been discussed, Perrault and Brothers Grimm rework certain tales to reflect their and society’s views regarding gender. Dallas J. Baker (2010) takes this further to argue that the monster in fairy tale also speaks to fears regarding homosexuality (much like the monster in horror film) for it often poses as an obstruction to the heteronormative point of the narrative closure (where a heterosexual couple usually unite). He reads the wolf in Perrault’s *Little Red Riding Hood* almost as transgender: ‘Imagine that the Big Bad Wolf is not hacked to death but rather teaches Little Red Riding Hood the delights of cross-dressing’ (Baker 2010, 18). By realising that fairy tales act as mirrors held by patriarchy, women and people of different gendered, queer, and racial (as argued in chapters one and two) identities can recreate these tales and hold up their mirrors to create their own narratives. This is Gaga revealing the subversive potential of rewriting narratives in order to give oneself a voice.

¹⁹⁶ Creed also refers to how Freud points to women as castrators in the case of the ‘Wolf Man’ taken from ‘From the history of an infantile neurosis’: ‘Although the threats or hints of castration which had come his way had emanated from women, this could not hold up the final result for long’ (1918, 86, quoted in Creed 1993a, 158-9). Again, this is an example where there is evidence of women as castrators in Freud’s work, yet he continues to give the role of castrator to the father (see Creed 1993a, 158-9).

¹⁹⁷ The image was taken by Eli Russell Linnetz.

¹⁹⁸ The importance of the mirror as an analogy for the reading of fairy tale has been discussed at length by Donald Haase in ‘Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship’ (2004). The mirror is repeatedly used as a tool throughout this thesis to analyse the way images are created onscreen.

I therefore read Gaga as a modern Medusa and a ‘good’ monster who challenges definitions of the monster in myth and fairy tales, while inspired by the more empowering aspects of the monstrous-feminine in horror film. In doing so, she creates a unique relationship with her fans that blurs the boundaries between herself and the spectator by encouraging her audience to identify with the monstrous as part of a shared identity. As a monster in the ‘Bad Romance’ video, she attracts the gaze and is pleasurable to male, female, and queer spectators, and throughout *The Fame Monster* she continues to rescue the monster from its exclusively negative connotations. The monster thus becomes a symbol of power not just for Gaga but her fans.

Therefore, like Medusa who could kill and protect, be both beautiful *and* a monster, as well as a victim *and* an aggressor, Lady Gaga is similarly an ambivalent monster. However, unlike the Gorgon, Gaga has agency for she constructs her own monstrous image that seeks to play on male fears inherent in monsters and horror. Further, Gaga lives and has a voice, one that tells her own story that will not be defined by men or her vulnerability as a victim. It is this view of Gaga’s monstrous as a potent feminine symbol that I argue has led some fans to interpret her as Medusa in their artwork.

Fan Art

There are a range of depictions of Gaga as Medusa, and most are created by amateur artists. There is the exception, however, of professional artist Todd Slater. In Slater’s piece (fig. 4.3.), he has taken the cover image from *The Fame Monster*, which shows Gaga in a black and white photo with cropped hair and face half obscured, and turned her into a Medusa with snake-hair. The black background of the original is replaced with red, and the lightning bolts act as a reference to David Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust, a musician who had a deep impact on Lady Gaga as an artist (Kreps 2016). The dual personality of Bowie/Stardust reflects the duality of both Medusa *and* Lady Gaga (Slater n.d.). As Slater says: ‘I wanted to use Medusa as a kind of fame monster because of the duality associated with her. To me, Medusa unifies beauty and horror, she wears many faces and is seductive and dangerous’ (Slater n.d.). It is unclear whether Slater is referring to Gaga’s fame monster, which as I have discussed encapsulates her different phobias and is a ‘bad’ monster, or whether he is referring to Gaga’s *own* monster. I suggest Slater is referring to the latter and *Gaga* as a monster, particularly because the ‘Bad Romance’ video visually connects seduction and danger.



Fig. 4.3. Artist Todd Slater's *Lady Gaga* (date unknown). The image reimagines the pop star's album cover for *The Fame Monster* (2009).

Slater has thus recognised how Gaga appeals to her audience as an ambivalent Medusa-like figure who seduces the gaze by combining beauty with the monstrous. Other pieces of artwork similarly play on Gaga as a powerful and seductive monster but with the addition of referencing *Versace's* Medusa logo. Gianni Versace established the fashion brand in 1978 and began to use Medusa as his logo in 1993, similarly because of her duality.¹⁹⁹ As Medusa is often described or depicted as a beautiful woman who entices the gaze, only to freeze the onlooker in return, Versace used her as an analogy for the beauty of his clothes which captured the spectator's eye (speaking to Seal 1996, 276). The inspiration behind the Medusa head was Gianni's childhood in Reggio di Calabria where he and his siblings would play amongst the ancient ruins. On the floor of one of these ruins was Medusa's head. Medusa in the ancient world was a popular image, used for its apotropaic function to ward away evil from temples and houses. Whether the *Versace* logo is an exact replica of this original, I am unsure, but it is very similar to the Medusa Rondanini, which is thought to have been created in the fifth century BCE by the artist Phidias (both date and artist are disputed, see Belson [1980]). If the Medusa Rondanini is from the classical period, then it is certainly a unique piece as it may be the first preserved portrayal of Medusa as beautiful rather than as grotesque (Belson 1980, 373). Thus, as Paulo M. Barroso says in 'Rhetoric of Seduction', the *Versace* symbol is fashion taking 'advantage of Medusa and embodies her characteristics to seduce consumers' (2017, 248).

¹⁹⁹ Therefore, *Versace* is not mentioned in the previous chapter, even though he had a very close relationship with Madonna.

This notion of Medusa as seductive, dangerous, and protective is interesting, and Medusa as an apotropaic figure can be aligned with the vagina. In ‘The Female Gaze: Sight and the Medusa Myth’ (2020), I have discussed the connection classicist Ann Suter (2015) has made between Medusa and the *anasyrma* – the revealing of the female genitals in Greek myth. In the ancient world, both Medusa and the *anasyrma* were a form of apotropaia. For example, in Plutarch’s *Virtues of Women*, Persian women display their genitals to shame their husbands into returning to war (5.246a). I argue that Gaga can also be viewed as a feminine protective symbol.²⁰⁰ With both Medusa’s head and the *anasyrma* having apotropaic functions, I read Gaga’s evocation of the monstrous-feminine, the vagina dentata, as encouraging her fans to seek solace in her image as a protective monster. Thus, returning to Gaga’s *Artpop* cover, with the reflective ball being replaced by the *Versace* head on Morgan’s re-envisioned piece, it heightens the idea of Medusa as a vagina dentata and protective talisman that, akin to a mirror, reflects evil back on to itself. However, it must be added, that not all view *Versace*’s Medusa as apotropaic. Philip Kent, in their discussion of *Versace*’s Medusa, points to the inability for this protective symbol to save the fashion brand’s founder: ‘...though Versace may have had the Medusa as his muse, he could not escape a violent death...the snake-haired Gorgon could not save Gianni’ (1999, 58 quoted in Ronnick 2005).

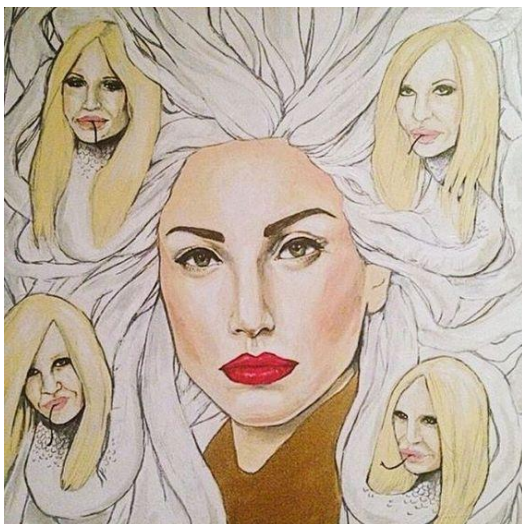


Fig. 4.4. A fan drawing of Gaga as Medusa, with her snake hair bearing the face of Donatella Versace. The piece is called *Mother Medusa* and was uploaded onto *Pinterest* in 2014.



Fig. 4.5. A digitally created piece of fan art that depicts Gaga as the *Versace* Medusa. *Medusa-Warrior* (2012).

²⁰⁰ In an interesting contemporary example, a Black Lives Matter (BLM) protestor, labelled ‘naked Athena’, sat directly in front of armed police in Portland with her legs apart (in the same pose as Gaga on the front cover of *Artpop!*) displaying her vulva, and effectively turned the police away. A modern example of the *anasyrma*, perhaps?

Yet, I suggest that fans read Gaga as the *Versace* Medusa because she frequently wears the brand and because her ‘monster’ embodies the seduction, danger, and protective qualities that Versace saw in the Gorgon. Gaga has a very close relationship with founder Gianni Versace’s sister, Donatella. Indeed, Donatella loaned Gaga a rare *Versace* dress to wear for her ‘Edge of Glory’ (2011) music video. The dress featured the *Versace* Medusa head on its belt, and Gaga paired this with two *Versace* necklaces that again featured the Medusa head logo. The Medusa heads worn by Gaga suggests an apotropaic function. After all, it is the goddess Athena/Minerva who wears Medusa on her aegis as a warning to her enemies. Yet, if Gaga is more of an Athena figure here, that is not how she is read by fans. By creating images of Gaga as Medusa, Gaga becomes the apotropaic symbol, *she* is the protective talisman.

A fan created piece that makes this *Versace* connection has been uploaded onto the site *Pinterest* by user Sara Towles. This artwork is a canvas painting of Gaga called *Mother Medusa* (fig. 4.4.), references Gaga’s Mother Monster and shows the pop star with snake hair, with the snakes each bearing the face of Donatella Versace (uploaded in 2014).²⁰¹ The piece clearly plays on the relationship between the two women.²⁰² Significantly, in 2021 Donatella launched an online series called *Medusa Power Talks*, a platform led by women who discuss their unique perspective of power. In one of these videos, and uploaded onto her personal *Instagram* page, Donatella says the following, ‘[Medusa is] not just a mythological symbol, she is every woman’ who symbolises ‘the refusal to be defeated’ (@donatella_versace, uploaded on the 29th of March 2020). She ends the video with: ‘You see the Medusa in me? I feel I am the Medusa’ (@donatella_versace). For Donatella, Medusa is much more than her ancient mythology, but a powerful female symbol of the tenacious woman. Thus, although Medusa may have died in the ancient myth, her power remains as a symbol perpetuated over thousands of years and into the modern day by, for example, the likes of *Versace*. Medusa is one monster who is the subject of male violence who refuses to be defeated; even after her beheading in the myths her powerful gaze remains. Thus, in Towles uploaded piece, both Gaga and Donatella are modern incarnations of the Gorgon, a figure who has come to be a ‘good’ monster that symbolises powerful women.

²⁰¹ Although uploaded by Towles, there is little to suggest that she was the artist who created this piece.

²⁰² Donatella has also designed products to celebrate the tenth anniversary of *Born This Way* and to raise money for Pride and the Born This Way Foundation, a charity created by Gaga that particularly seeks to help LGBT+ youth.

Another piece with a *Versace* reference is found on a blog called *LadyDelDiamondis* (uploaded in 2012, see fig. 4.5.).²⁰³ It is a black and gold image that has the *Versace* key boarder design, but has replaced Medusa's face with Gaga's. Here, Gaga is depicted wearing the horns that she famously wore for her 'Born This Way' (2011) music video and has her mouth open wide with fang teeth bared. In this piece, Gaga's appropriation of the monstrous manifests in a connection with the beauty and monstrosity of Medusa, as well as another suggestion of the *vagina dentata*, with teeth that resemble vampire's fangs (a manifestation of the castrating woman). The piece is either called *Medusa-Warrior* or is taken from a well know Lady Gaga fan account on *Twitter* that goes by the same name. This part is unclear; however, that Gaga is connected to Medusa as a warrior again points to Gaga's form of the monstrous being a shield. Therefore, I suggest that fans read Gaga's form of monster as *protective* (as does Gaga in the comments above) in a re-articulation of the term 'monster'.

Therefore, to modern recipients of her story, Medusa has become synonymous with trauma, violence against women, and female empowerment and, for many, she has gradually transformed into a 'good' monster. When fans read Gaga as Medusa, they are continuing this reception of the Gorgon as a positive feminine symbol because of the distinction Gaga creates between 'good' and 'bad' monsters. In Medusa are themes of trauma, victimhood, but also power and protection. Like Medusa, I argue that Gaga is a powerful monstrous figure and akin to an apotropaic symbol that her fans seek solace in and wish to share in her monstrous identity. Thus, if these fans identify with Gaga as a monster, do those who depict her as the Gorgon in their art similarly identify with Medusa?

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Gaga draws comparison with Ovid's Medusa as a woman who transforms into a powerful monster after being subjected to some form of male violence. By also reading Gaga through a Medusa lens, however, I contend that her initial use of the monster is something much bigger. Drawing on Barbara Creed's reading of Medusa as the *vagina dentata*, I have argued that in the 'Bad Romance' music video, Gaga has created a distinction between good and bad monsters by becoming the *femme castratrice* who takes revenge upon a group of men that symbolise the predatory music business. While women have continuously been aligned with the monstrous and constructed as 'Other' in male

²⁰³ An amalgamation of the blogger's favourite singers Lady Gaga, Lana Del Rey and Mariana Diamondis, aka Marina and the Diamonds

writing, Gaga transforms *herself* into a monstrous spectacle on her own terms by exploiting male fears of the female body. In doing so, Gaga gives herself *agency* as a monstrous woman in an empowered position, and this can be viewed as a political move as a woman with creative control in the industry.

Thus, going beyond 'Bad Romance', throughout *The Fame Monster* Gaga continues to subvert monstrous narratives by becoming the *vagina dentata* in order to play with power dynamics. This is a pop star who is in control of how she looks and how she is viewed and, as a desiring subject, she subverts myth and fairy tales that depict women as monsters or virgins as part of a strict dichotomy to create her own version of the monster and her own narrative. Gaga exploits the fears and desires inherent in the monster for her own gain and to appeal to a larger fan base, and it is as a modern Medusa that she becomes a monstrous spectacle that fixates the diverse gaze of her audience. As the *femme castratrice*, Gaga refutes Laura Mulvey's assertion that women are to be looked at as passive images devoid of desire for she actively seeks to be looked at and to be identified with. Thus, this use of the monstrous can also be viewed as a tactic to seduce her audience. The monster is repeatedly aligned with fears of the 'Other', and by turning the monster into a 'good' monster, Gaga opens herself up to be identified with by a range of identities who feel 'Other' in society. In doing so, she not only draws on the monstrous to empower herself, but also her fans. With a broad audience gazing and identifying with Gaga, her fans join in her monstrous identity.

Fans thus use Gaga to construct their own identities, and this will continue to be discussed in the subsequent chapter which explores how Gaga continues to blur the boundaries between herself and her fans in her later role as Mother Monster. This mother and infant relationship, I suggest, can be framed by again returning to Barbara Creed's analysis of the monstrous-feminine in horror film. Creed's work is split into two halves: the *vagina dentata* and abjection. Creed engages with psychoanalysis in order to explore how male fears regarding the female body manifest so explicitly in horror films that the genre offers an excellent opportunity through which to explore women's bodies and the unconscious fears surrounding them. Therefore, while this chapter explored Gaga's early use of the monstrous as playing to fears of the consuming female body, I also suggest that Gaga's Mother Monster can be viewed as a consuming monster, but in very different terms. Whereas the castrating woman speaks to Oedipal fears, the abject mother, or the overbearing monstrous mother, reflects and embodies pre-Oedipal fears regarding the female body. Using Creed's

interpretation of abjection, Gaga can be read as blurring the boundaries between herself and her fans in a way that almost threatens to infiltrate their identities.

Chapter 5

'Born This Way': Medusa and Lady Gaga as Mother Monsters

In the previous chapter, I argued that Lady Gaga can be read as a 'modern Medusa' who shares striking similarities with the Gorgon and plays with Oedipal fears of the female body. I propose that the parallels between the pop star and Gorgon can be taken further. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, when Medusa is raped, she is left pregnant with two of Neptune's (Poseidon's) children: Chrysaor and Pegasus. These children are only born once Perseus has decapitated Medusa's head, and they spring from her blood. As a monstrous mother, I argue that the Medusa lens is apt for exploring Gaga's later role as *Mother Monster*.

It was Lady Gaga's fans, her Little Monsters, who gave Gaga the Mother Monster title, and they clearly view her as a maternal figure. As discussed in the previous chapter, many fans are attracted to Gaga because they feel 'monstrous' in their own ways, be it because of their sexuality, personal history, or appearance, and want to embrace and share this monstrous identity with Gaga. It was in 2011 that Gaga fully adopted the role when she created a fictional aetiological story of Mother Monster in her 'Born This Way' music video (directed by Nick Knight).²⁰⁴ In this video, Gaga as a monster gives birth to heads born without bodies (and which bear resemblance to her own face), as well as to hybrid 'little monsters'. Significantly, the themes of the mother, the birth of hybrid beings, the severed head, the mirror, and reflection which are all found in 'Born This Way' are also key parts of Medusa's mythology, and which Julia Kristeva discusses in her reading of the Gorgon as the abject mother. By drawing on Kristeva's theory of abjection and by once more returning to Medusa who, as a monster, captivates the gaze of the onlooker, the ways in which Gaga uses her Mother Monster persona to appeal and to connect with her audience can be explored.

Abjection will be discussed in detail below, but it essentially refers to that which threatens boundaries, and it also plays to *pre-Oedipal* fears regarding the mother. As mentioned in chapter three, the pre-Oedipal mother is *powerful* and, while the child wants to remain in blissful symbiosis with her, the infant must also separate from her to establish their own individual identity. The pre-Oedipal mother threatens the boundaries between self and other and is deemed as abject in order for the infant to separate from her. Thus, Kristeva

²⁰⁴ 'Born This Way' was the first single to be released from the album of the same name.

argues that when the subject, in later life, is confronted with something that threatens to cross boundaries, it evokes the terrifying mother. While this was first explored in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982), in 1998 she also curated an exhibition as part of the *Parti Pris* (*Taking Sides*) series held at the Louvre, that was turned into a book called *The Severed Head: Capital Visions* (translated into English in 2012), in which she expanded on some of her thoughts on abjection. Using Medusa, she argued that representations of the severed head in art sublimate the fear of the overpowering mother by safely representing the primary cutting away from her.

Kristeva's theory of abjection (1982) has been adopted by Barbara Creed (1993a) in relation to horror film. Creed argues that horror films, with their displays of the monstrous body, bodily fluids, and hybrid creatures that transcend boundaries, all recreate the primary source of abjection: the mother. While this can horrify, it can also appeal to the spectator by recreating the wish to return to the blissful undifferentiated union with the pre-Oedipal mother. Returning to Creed's film theory, I propose that Gaga as a Mother Monster uses the abject to break the boundary between herself and the spectator to recreate a mother/infant type relationship and for her audience to *desire* her. Thus, although cynics may read Gaga's use of 'everything peripheral' as simply a way of profiting from the monstrous (Mendez 2017, 74), I read this as far more complex than simply garnering attention and shock value. This is because women's bodies have repeatedly been constructed as monstrous and as sources of abjection and this has been used to *denigrate*, yet Gaga's Mother Monster plays with abjection in a subversive reclamation of the monstrous-feminine. As Laini Burton (2013) says, Gaga calls to abjection rather than refutes it and thus: 'the monstrous feminine is performed to affect a sense of identification in the fan – one that bears at the very foundations of identity; the maternal relationship' (2013, 5). Although Burton connects Gaga with abjection, I argue that, by using Medusa and Kristeva's reading of her as the abject mother and the themes of mirroring and the gaze in her myth, a deeper analysis of *how* her image appeals to the spectator can be given. I will use this Medusa lens as a way of proposing that Gaga is a modern Medusa who blurs boundaries between herself and the spectator by creating a pre-Oedipal longing for the mother/infant relationship, and encourages her Little Monsters to use her as a mirror to embrace their own 'monstrous' identities and to share in her monstrosity.

This chapter will therefore continue to explore how Gaga uses the monstrous to appeal to her fans. It is particularly significant for an understanding of how Gaga's Mother

Monster in 'Born This Way' appeals to her audience that Gaga becomes a 'Monster Goddess' (discussed below). Thus, what is unique about Gaga, and to a lesser extent the rest of the women within this thesis, is that she is not simply venerated by her fans as a goddess but idolised as a *monster*. There is something different happening here. Researchers of celebrity and fandom, such as Chris Rojek (2001), have found and argued that the experience between celebrity and fan is akin to 'religious worship', where celebrities are often viewed as having God-like qualities (Rojek 2001, 53). Rojek thus views celebrity culture as 'a culture of faux ecstasy' that fills the space left by the 'death of God and decline of the Church' as society moves towards the secular (2001, 90). Religious studies as a discipline, therefore, has tools that are useful for exploring such fan relationships. However, Gaga encourages fans to worship her as a goddess figure, as will be discussed below, but also as a monster. Further, she actively encourages her fans to join in her monstrous identity, particularly on online spaces such as the social networking site little monsters.com, created by Gaga and her team for her fans to 'gather, create, and...inspire' (Little Monsters, n.d.). Gaga thus pushes fans to engage with her monstrous image, and this in part explains why some have interpreted her as Medusa in their fan art.

Vivian Asimos in *Digital Monsters* (2020) has revealed how religious studies can be used to explore monstrous narratives and how, as a discipline, it is adapting to study online spaces. She approaches digital communities as an anthropologist and has explored the impact of monstrous narratives on author and reader on the site *Reddit*. Asimos' work analyses the ways horror fans collaborate to create fictional stories and thus shows how fans are more in control of narratives because of such online spaces. As there are increasingly more platforms where online users can publish their work, there is more creative freedom and ability to engage with existing work. This draws comparison with Gaga's fans who are engaging with Gaga's form of the monstrous but also points to how Gaga herself, and indeed the other pop stars within this thesis, are subverting existing narratives to create their own. It is this freedom to create and publish different narratives that is changing scholarship. Thus, like Asimos, I will be using religious studies as a tool through which to read how celebrity and fans alike are engaging with monstrous narratives. I will particularly be drawing on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas to posit how the monster has been used to reflect constructed societal boundaries, and how Gaga is using the monstrous to challenge these.

Significantly, in her research, Asimos found that, while audiences knew monsters were not real, they had a very real effect. Therefore, to bring into question 'belief' is to miss

the point entirely (Asimos 2020, 32). These online monsters, whose narratives were created and expanded upon by a digital community, were used to scare and to entertain, but also to frame discussion around the marginalisation of the mentally ill. To quote Asimos: ‘These authors understand that “normal” society does not treat or accept the mentally ill as one of them’ (2020, 54). Thus, while the narratives Asimos considers reveal ‘a consideration of the mentally ill in an attempted positive light’ because they are attempting to demonstrate ‘how they see the outside world acting’, there is a fear ‘in being considered one of them... These technological monsters control the other figures in the narratives... Those affected by these monsters are regarded as being insane and are dismissed’ (2020, 54). Association with the monster, then, reveals this deep anxiety in society of the dismissal of the mentally ill to the boundaries where the monsters lie. While Gaga’s fictional monster and the narrative she creates in her performances adheres to Asimos’ findings of having a very real effect on her audience, what is distinct is that the audience does not fear Gaga’s monster or wish to distance from it, but to *become* it. I argue that Gaga brings the monster inside the proverbial boundary as a positive figure for the marginalised to identify with.

This is supported by a study by Click et al 2013, who found that Lady Gaga had re-articulated the monster into a positive figure, and that fans used Mother Monster as a mirror to reflect their differences from mainstream society (Click et al 2013, 360). Gaga’s Mother Monster was thus viewed as a ‘maternal safe haven’ for fans who felt, in their own ways, ‘monstrous’ (Click et al 2013, 361). This again points to the monstrous-feminine embodying more than simply fears of a sex ‘difference’, as mentioned in the previous chapter. I will begin with a discussion of Click et al’s study before a deeper consideration of Kristeva’s abjection and how it has been used by Barbara Creed as part of her reading of monsters in horror film. This will then be used in conjunction with Medusa to analyse Lady Gaga’s ‘Born This Way’ video and to argue that Gaga is a *modern Medusa*.

Little Monster Identification: A Study

Click et al published their findings in 2013 after they had interviewed forty-five self-identified Little Monsters.²⁰⁵ The study found that Little Monsters identified with Gaga because she had re-articulated the monster into a positive symbol for the ‘Other’, as discussed

²⁰⁵ The various identities that constituted the study’s sample were as follows: ‘sex: 21 female, 22 male, 1 transgender, 1 genderqueer; sexual identity: 11 bisexual, 12 gay or lesbian, 21 heterosexual, 1 queer; race: 6 Asian or Asian American, 1 Black, 5 Latino/a, 1 Middle Eastern, 2 Multiracial, 30 White; nationality: 31 American, 1 Australian, 2 British, 2 Canadian, 1 Colombian, 1 Dutch, 1 German, 1 Greek, 1 Kazakhstani, 3 Korean, 1 Namibian’ (Click et al 2013, 377).

in the previous chapter. Fans who had experienced their own sense of ‘Otherness’ in society, be that because of their sexuality and/or being victims of bullying, came to identify with Gaga because of a perceived collective struggle, for Gaga is bisexual and she has been open about being bullied while she was in school as well as her own struggles with alcohol, addiction, and abuse. In Gaga they found a figure in popular culture who revelled in her ‘Otherness’ and with whom they could share in a monstrous identity. The study also found that Gaga openly and visibly encouraged her fans to use her to construct or redefine their identities, as evident in the following quotation from the pop star: ‘use me as an escape. ...I am the excuse to explore your identity. To be exactly who you are to feel unafraid. To not judge yourself, to not hate yourself’ (Gaga to Van Meter 2011, see Click et al 2013, 361). The study also found that fans were aware that Gaga encouraged them to view her as a maternal figure, particularly through the use of social media where Gaga directly engages and has conversations with fans (Click et al 2013, 373).²⁰⁶ Further, comments made by the interviewees pointed to Gaga being a ‘surrogate voice’ who uses her platform and position of power to speak for the vulnerable or oppressed groups (Click et al 2013, 369). Therefore, Gaga not only gives herself a voice by creating her own monstrous narrative, as discussed in the previous chapter, she also uses her voice for her fans.

Gaga has openly spoken and taken a stance on several matters, especially LGBT+ issues. In 2012, for example, Gaga co-founded the *Born This Way Foundation* with her mother Cynthia Germanotta. The foundation’s mission is to ‘support the mental and emotional wellness of young people by putting their needs, ideas, and voices first’ and there is a particular emphasis on helping young LGBT+ people (*Born This Way Foundation* online).²⁰⁷ Indeed, the premise of the song ‘Born This Way’ is one of inclusivity, no matter one’s sexual identity or race (discussed below).²⁰⁸ Thus, while Click et al said that many

²⁰⁶ Gaga as a protective figure to her fans has been hinted at by *Forbes* writer Judy Martin who views the pop star as a:

“Kali-esque figure” who is so black that she can absorb any negativity and eat it up, all while and wielding a sword to protect her young children. In Gaga’s case, she embraces the downtrodden misfits who are teased in school, as she was.
(Martin 2011).

In an interesting link with the previous chapter, Kali is often portrayed as a castrating goddess and Jane Ussher, in *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body*, equates her with Medusa (2006, 1-2)

²⁰⁷ In September 2020, the foundation released a book called *Channel Kindness* that included stories from contributors and Lady Gaga of kindness and acceptance for LGBT+ youth.

²⁰⁸ There are many times when Gaga has used her platform to advocate for equal rights. For example, the infamous meat dress she wore to the 2010 MTV Music Video Awards was a statement used to criticise the US military’s policy of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’. Later, in 2015, Gaga also wrote ‘Til It Happens To You’ to raise awareness of the number of rape crimes conducted on American college campuses.

studies have viewed fandoms as ‘pathological’, Gaga’s fandom and this close identification with Gaga was shown to have ‘prosocial benefits’ (Click et al 2013, 377). Not only did fans feel empowered by Gaga and less alone, there was clear evidence that Gaga also gave back to her fans via her platform and charitable work. I propose that there needs to be a deeper analysis of how Gaga uses her Mother Monster persona and why this particular incarnation of the monster is so effective in appealing to fans. I argue that monster film theory can be used to analyse Gaga’s music video ‘Born This Way’, to understand why fans seek solace in, and identify with, Gaga’s version of the monstrous mother.

The Abject Mother Monster

In Lady Gaga’s ‘Born This Way’ video, graphic images of birthing scenes of pods that resemble Gaga’s face and which are covered in bodily fluid are juxtaposed with Gaga adopting various roles inspired by horror film tropes. Such horror themes evoke the abject, often referred to as that which arouses disgust, but more accurately as that which threatens boundaries between the clean and the unclean, between self and other. Barbara Creed adopts Julia Kristeva’s interpretation of abjection to argue that images of horror that transgress boundaries (such as the feminine body, hybrid animals, living corpses, or bodily waste) evoke the pre-Oedipal fear of the overbearing mother who threatens to symbolically consume her child. It is during the pre-Oedipal stage that the child begins the process of ‘abjecting’ the mother in order to detach from her and to mark their own subjectivity. This is a transitional period in the child’s psychosexual development from the Semiotic, where the mother holds authority, to the Symbolic, with the latter being governed by the law of the father (see Introduction). The mother-infant relationship is thus an ambivalent one: the child wants to be nurtured by the mother but must separate from her in order to establish the self as an individual. It is the child’s entry into the Symbolic that truly marks the cutting away from the mother, as the father places a prohibition on the mother’s body to prevent autoeroticism and the incest taboo. Still, unlike other psychoanalytic theories, Kristeva gives the mother a significant role in the formation of a child’s identity.

Kristeva largely used the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas to construct her theory. Douglas, in her influential book *Purity and Danger* (1966), explored how societies create symbolic categories of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’ that give constructed notions of order and meaning. To do so, Douglas uses the example of dirt as a form of pollution. While this is because it is unhygienic, Douglas adds: ‘If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from

our notions of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place' (Douglas 2002, 36). In other words, dirt becomes a form of *symbolic* pollution when it is found in a place where it should not be because it has transcended *boundaries*. This is further clarified by Douglas:

Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table... In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.
Douglas 2002, 36-7.

Therefore, to return to Kristeva: 'it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva 1982, 4). Kristeva argues that pollution falls into two categories: excremental ('and its equivalents [decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.]', i.e., that which presents an external threat [Kristeva 1982, 71]), and menstrual (which 'stands for the danger issuing from within the identity [social or sexual]', i.e., an internal threat of 'sexual difference' [Kristeva 1982, 71]), and that both are linked with women's bodies which are reduced to their (potential) reproductive functions. Women's connection with menstruation is more easily understood, and Kristeva argues that women are also associated with excrement because it is often the mother who first teaches the child toilet-training as well as 'mapping of the self's clean and proper body' (Kristeva 1982, 72). It is during this time in the Semiotic that the mother and child are united, and where the mother is the source of authority, and there is no 'embarrassment' or 'shame' (Kristeva 1982, 74). However, with entry into the Symbolic, and the law of the father and the acquisition of language that distinguishes (using signifiers) the unclean from clean, the child becomes aware of these 'pollutants' that become inextricably tied with the female body. This leads the child to want to abject totally the mother, and it is from this point on that, when the subject is presented with something that evokes disgust or threatens boundaries between self and other, it will recall the primary abjection of the mother.

Women's bodies continue to be aligned with abjection, because their bodily fluids and liminal maternal bodies do not respect 'boundaries' or 'borders'. It is this fear of women's bodies not being 'contained' and threatening to 'spill out' that leads them to evoke the threat of the pre-Oedipal mother and maternal authority. Therefore, patriarchy continues to deem women's bodies as 'polluting' in a bid to regulate the female body and instate male authority

to assuage the threat women's bodies evoke. This continued alignment of the abject with the maternal body, and thus women in general, is problematic. To quote Deborah Caslav Covino:

One of Kristeva's interests is the ways in which the necessary abjection of the mother – our separation from her in order to become individualized, to take objects, to enter language, to become good citizens of the family and the social world – is mistranslated into the abjection of women in general, who are reduced to the maternal function.
Covino 2004, 21.

Thus, Kristeva highlights how religion has been used to continuously place prohibitions and shame on women's bodies. She says that, in relation to religion, 'the body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic' (1982, 102). Yet, as Creed says in her reading of Kristeva, which she uses to construct her horror film theory, the female body reveals its 'debt to nature' because of its 'lack of "corporeal integrity": it secretes (blood, milk); it changes size, grows, and swells' (Creed 1993b, 122). Therefore:

...no matter what differences there may be among societies where religious prohibitions, which are above all behavior prohibitions, are supposed to afford protection from defilement, one sees everywhere the importance, both social and symbolic, of women and particularly the mother. In societies where it occurs, ritualization of defilement is accompanied by a strong concern for separating the sexes, and this means giving men rights over women.
Kristeva 1982, 70.

Kristeva points to 'Biblical abominations' and uses the Old Testament as an example of religion trying to create order by designating objects as 'impure', for example food taboos, which become a source of abjection (Kristeva 1982, 99-100). However, after the birth of Christ, abjection is also an internalised conflict through the notion of 'sin'. To quote Kristeva: 'the brimming flesh of sin belongs, of course, to both sexes; but its root and basic representation is nothing other than feminine temptation' (Kristeva 1982, 126). This is because it relates back to the story of Eve, and thus Creed, again by engaging with Kristeva's work, reads this as perpetuating the idea that women are intrinsically treacherous, and who can deceive with their outer appearances which disguise their inherent monstrousness (Creed 1993a, 42). Women can thus be deemed externally and internally monstrous and abject, as become apparent throughout this thesis.

Therefore, male hegemony almost relies on the idea of women's bodies as polluting in order to surround their bodies with a set of rules that reinstate boundaries between 'clean' and

‘unclean’, i.e., constructed notions of ‘cleanliness’ via designating what is sacred and what is polluting. It is the role of religion to expel the abject and instate these boundaries, but as society move towards the secular it is also the purpose of literature (Kristeva 1982, 17 – later she also argues art on page 37). Creed argues that it is also the purpose of the horror film which she regards as a form of ‘modern-defilement rite’:

As a form of modern-defilement rite, the horror film attempts to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all her universe signifies. In this sense, signifying horror involves a representation of, and a reconciliation with, the maternal body.
Creed 1993a, 14.

Images of horror such as bodily fluids, the monstrous-feminine, or hybrid monsters (anything that does not respect boundaries and evokes disgust – particularly the corpse) allow the spectator to regress to a pre-Oedipal union with the mother, a time when there was not a distinction between ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’, and when ‘bodily wastes, while set apart from the body, were not seen as objects of embarrassment and shame’, that is both terrifying yet *familiar and satisfying* (Creed 1993a, 13). It is largely through the horror film (although as noted in chapter three, other films as well) that a union with the mother is possible and reveals the Symbolic as unstable, revealing the precarious nature of patriarchal control and the threat that the female body poses which never goes away, even if boundaries are usually restored at the end of the narrative. Creed uses this to again argue that women in horror films are not always passive victims but are threatening.

An example is the horror film *The Exorcist* (1973). In short, *The Exorcist* centres on the possession of a young girl called Regan who lives alone with her actress mother (there is no father figure). After being possessed by the devil, Regan excretes bodily waste and desires an incestual relationship with the mother, killing the mother’s lover in a bid for an undisturbed relationship between mother and child. In this possessed state, Regan has regressed to the pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother. The film’s strong religious tone also plays to the idea of women as inherently abject or sinful, as discussed above, because Regan transforms from an apparently innocent young girl into an internally and externally monstrous figure (Creed 1993a, 42). Yet, for the spectators in the audience, while the sight of bodily fluids that secrete from Regan’s body may evoke disgust (for the audience are situated ‘within the social symbolic’), these scenes can also be pleasurable for they break the ‘taboo on filth’, and it allows the spectator to regress ‘to that time when the mother-child relationship was marked by an untrammelled pleasure in “playing” with the body and its

wastes' (Creed 1993a, 13). The horror film offers a regression and plays to the desire for the mother, before reasserting boundaries. Yet, when the demon is exercised from Regan, 'the symbolic order is restored, but in name only' (Creed 1993a, 41).

However, the power of and desire for the pre-Oedipal mother can also manifest in horror films as the overbearing mother, the mother who threatens to symbolically consume the child's identity. Creed includes other examples from horror where the mother and child's pre-Symbolic relationship is evoked using cases where the mother will not relinquish control of the child, and thus is it the *mother* who takes the role of the monstrous-feminine, as found in the films *The Birds* (1963) and *Carrie* (1976) (Creed 1993a, 12). The father is also absent in these films and the mother does not want to give the child up because, just as the child needs to separate from the mother to establish their identity, the mother needs the infant 'to authenticate her existence – an existence which needs validation because of her problematic relation to the symbolic realm' (Creed 1993a, 11-12). Breaking away from the mother can be difficult for the infant, but if they do not separate, they are unable to take up their 'proper place in relation to the symbolic' (Creed 1993a, 12). Thus, in horror films, the mother who will not relinquish her hold over her child has a terrifying impact on the child's development as they enter adulthood. As will be discussed below, this is not the case for Gaga's fans as the pop star's Mother Monster allows a 'safe' union with her.

Abjection in horror serves to reinstate boundaries, yet, to do so, the spectator is allowed to regress to a pre-Oedipal union with the mother that is pleasing. By confronting the abject, the ambivalence of the mother is evoked, and this repulsion and fascination could potentially explain the attraction of the horror genre. Using this as the basis, I suggest that this theory can be a useful framework for exploring how Lady Gaga uses her Mother Monster persona to consciously appeal to the maternal role as a pop star with whom her fans can identify, and presents a narrative where boundaries are not necessarily re-established at the end. Creed's analysis also points to the significance of sight here, where a regression to a symbiotic relationship with the mother occurs by looking at the abject onscreen. This will inform my argument that Gaga is consciously manipulating her appearance in 'Born This Way' to appeal to this maternal relationship with her fans, before postulating how Medusa can be used to provide further insight.

Born This Way: The Monster Goddess

The video for 'Born This Way' is split into two parts: the first serves as a narrative, told by Lady Gaga about Mother Monster in the third person, and the second with the 'Born This Way' song actually playing and thus more like a typical music video.²⁰⁹ It begins with the opening music from Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958), scored by Bernard Hermann (Zafar 2011).²¹⁰ Gaga then states her 'Manifesto of Mother Monster', a narrative that describes Mother Monster as an alien life form who created a race of people, a 'race within the race of humanity' who bear 'no prejudice, no judgement' ('Manifesto', Lady Gaga). This 'race', the manifesto and video imply, are Gaga's fans: her 'Little Monsters'. The video clearly uses religious symbolism to position Gaga as a Creator who gives birth through 'mitosis', the splitting of a cell into two, and therefore replacing the need for a father figure. Gaga is shown wearing a third eye (oddly, on her chin rather than forehead) which is often used as a symbol of higher consciousness in several religious traditions, and there are lotus flowers which also have links with certain Eastern religions. Her hair is kept in place by bands that form a cross, which Aylin Zafar (2011) reads as a pope's hat, and Gaga is shown at forty-one seconds (and later at one minute and twelve seconds) on a crucifix, with the camera sweeping down to position Mother Monster on top of the world.

The religious symbols reflect the song's lyrical content that are sung a little later: 'It doesn't matter if you love him, or capital H-I-M, Just put your paws up 'cause you were born this way, baby' ('Born This Way' 2011). The song's opening lines connect both a straight female and queer spectator ('...if you love him') with those who believe in a god ('capital H-I-M') collectively as her Little Monsters who are urged to unite ('put your paws up').²¹¹ As a matriarchal monster, an inherently abject figure who is also a virginal goddess because she has given birth through 'mitosis', Gaga has conflated the boundaries between 'good' and 'bad', 'sacred' and 'taboo', thus to refer to a title *Rolling Stone* magazine gave Gaga, she is the *Monster Goddess* (Hiatt 2011). This is particularly significant when considering the subject matter of the song, which is one that celebrates multifaceted queer and racial identities, and which has since become a queer anthem:

No matter gay, straight, or bi
Lesbian, transgendered life

²⁰⁹ The latter half was played on music channels rather than the full seven minutes nineteen seconds.

²¹⁰ For the significance of *Vertigo* see footnote 175.

²¹¹ As has been mentioned, putting 'paws up' is the symbol of the Little Monster by raising hands curved into a claw shape.

I'm on the right track baby
I was born to survive
No matter black, white or beige
Chola or orient made
I'm on the right track baby
I was born to be brave
I'm beautiful in my way
'Cause God makes no mistakes
I'm on the right track, baby I was born this way
Lady Gaga, 'Born This Way' (2011).

Gaga is addressing the complicated relationship that often exists between religion and homosexuality and is reassuring her fans that religion should be open to all, regardless of one's identity.²¹² If the lyrics promote ideas of religious acceptance, the video almost offers a religious alternative in the form of Gaga as matriarch and Creator. As the goddess, Gaga encourages fans to seek comfort in her if they feel they do not have a parental figure in a biological or religious sense. If one feels metaphorically 'monstrous' they can share in this identity as an Other with Gaga who becomes the protective matriarch, the mother with a capital 'M', who replaces the patriarch of Abrahamic religions.

Gaga is thus venerated by her fans as a goddess and a monster, and as a Monster Goddess, Gaga is conflating the boundaries between good and evil because she aligns religion with the abject body: the monster. Whereas religion seeks 'to ward off the subject's fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother' (Kristeva 1982, 64), Gaga uses religious imagery to encourage a shared identity as a monstrous goddess. That Gaga is breaking boundaries here between the monster and religion is supported by Creed's following reading of the monster in horror film as a source of abjection that embodies as set of 'religious abominations' that religion seeks to expel:

...definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection – particularly in relation to the following religious 'abominations': sexual immorality and perversion; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest. These forms of abjection are also central to the construction of the monstrous in the modern horror film.
Creed 1993a, 9.

²¹² Gaga is also addressing the complicated relationship many religions have with trans people. However, my work here is building upon existing theory that has focused primarily on homosexuality rather than the full range of identities that constitute the LGBTQIA+ community. There is room for further research.

Monsters embody societal fears and serve in the horror film to bring these fears to the fore, only to (usually) expel them and restore order and boundaries. Again, this points to Creed's argument that horror films have a similar purpose as some religious rites.

In Creed's list of 'religious abominations' above, she includes sexual perversity. This can be read as including homosexuality, something Kristeva acknowledges in *Powers of Horror* in relation to the Old Testament. Using Leviticus chapter 18, Kristeva acknowledges that homosexuality is deemed a source of religious abjection (Kristeva 1982, 103).²¹³ Using Creed then, homosexuality can be read as one of many forms of religious abjection that are 'central to the construction of the monstrous in the modern horror film' (1993a, 9). This has been acknowledged in a range of scholarly examinations of the monster in cinema and touched on in the previous chapter. Film theorist Harry M. Benshoff claims in 'The Monster and the Homosexual' (2015) that: 'to create a broad analogy, monster is to 'normality' as homosexual is to heterosexuality' (2015, 117).²¹⁴ Yet, as the monster is an 'amalgamation' of various societal concerns regarding what is 'Other', perhaps a better way of framing the monster is as *queer* for it embodies 'racial, ethnic, and/or political ideological Otherness while more frequently they are constructed primarily as sexual others (women, bisexuals, and homosexuals)' (2015, 118). The body these fears manifest in is nearly always *feminised*. Thus, the monster is repeatedly aligned with the abject feminine body that threatens to cross boundaries, just as queer people threaten to transcend gender and sexual boundaries (and patriarchy relies on heteronormativity for its power). Benshoff therefore concludes that, although some monsters may reinforce 'sexist or homophobic fears', the monster can be claimed by a queer audience as a figure for identification and as a possible site for subversion (2015, 126).

I am arguing that Gaga is consciously reclaiming the monster, particularly in the video through the use of religion, to speak directly to her queer audience, and to those who do not 'fit in' or are 'abjected' from society, as a figure with which they can identify. She re-articulates the monstrous by conflating the monster with the goddess and bringing it into the mainstream. Gaga is thus doing the precise opposite of using the monster as a 'modern defilement rite', as in her video, boundaries are not reasserted at the end of the narrative. This, I suggest, is pointing to the way Gaga is threatening the status quo and encouraging her

²¹³ 'You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination' (Leviticus 18:22).

²¹⁴ The monster can often be read as embodying concerns of homosexuality because it is often the figure that must be defeated in order for the heterosexual union of the protagonists at the point of the film's narrative closure (Benshoff 2015, 118).

fans to delve ever deeper into a relationship with her, that teeters close to the edge of Gaga consuming her Little Monsters as a monstrous mother. Yet, Gaga's role is quite obviously a performed one. As will be discussed below, Gaga takes a range of positions in the video and thus she 'refuses categorisation or fixed subjectivity' (Burton 2013, 2). Therefore, although Gaga as a woman can already be regarded as a source of abjection because women are repeatedly reduced to their reproductive bodies, by presenting herself as an abject figure on her own terms, she resists the ways in which women are typically defined or represented in popular culture. This is because women's 'abject' bodies are either hidden by being heavily sexualised and detached from maternal functions, or displayed as a source of disgust, the monstrous-feminine, for example. However, Gaga conflates these boundaries by being a sexual and 'beautiful' pop star as well as the grotesque monster. As Gaga has said:

I am a feminist. I reject wholeheartedly the way we are taught to perceive women. The beauty of women, how a woman should act or behave. Women are strong and fragile. Women are beautiful and ugly. We are soft spoken and loud, all at once. Qtd. in Woolston 2012, 110.

Not only this but as her fans 'enter the relationship in an already established post-Oedipal state of subjectivity' they 'needn't struggle with separation in their identification with Mother Monster and therefore, the relationship does not threaten subject formation or loss of identity' (Burton 2013, 4). Gaga performs this Mother Monster persona as a 'safe' way of evoking the wish to identify with her from her Little Monsters, without posing an actual threat. She invites identification from her queer audience who may use her as a positive role model, and thus Gaga's abject mother does not simply reveal the symbolic as unstable by challenging patriarchy, she is also challenging heteronormativity.

This invitation to share in Gaga's identity as a monster continues in the video when Gaga gives birth to *herself*.

The Birth of Little Monsters and the Severed Head

As the manifesto continues to be read by Mother Monster, she is shown bent over with her legs open and a face that mimics her own is represented on the back of her head. It creates the impression that Gaga's own head is coming out of her vagina, and as the camera swoops down from above it looks as though Gaga is giving birth to *herself*. In fact, during the *Born This Way Ball* tour (2012-2013), Gaga accomplished this by wearing a giant inflatable pregnancy suit, with her own head and torso at the top of the costume (see fig. 5.1.). During the performance, she would theatrically push and then crawl through the 'birth canal' to

emerge onstage (Davisson 2013, 43). Through the use of the liminal maternal body and by giving birth to her own monstrosity, Gaga is essentially in control of her own image. It draws a parallel with how Gaga is explicitly becoming an abject monster rather than society deeming her as such. This, I argue, is Gaga taking an existing patriarchal fear of women's bodies and re-claiming it as she constructs her own image to destabilise male control. Further, by giving birth to herself, she is both Mother Monster and a Little Monster, and, as the latter, she therefore sides herself with her fans.

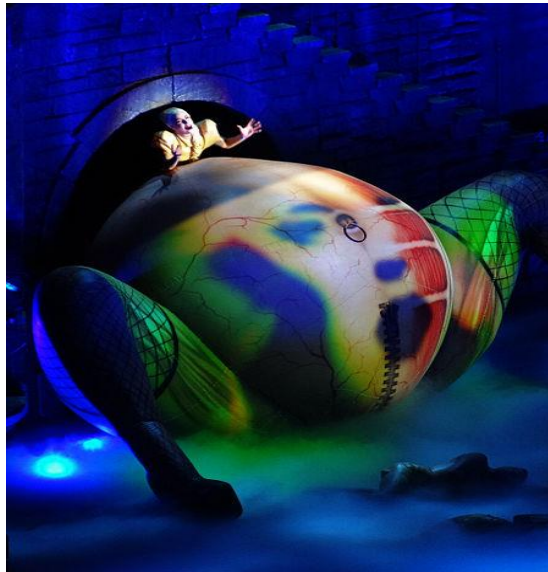


Fig. 5.1. Lady Gaga at the *Born This Way Ball* tour (2012)

Returning to the birthing scene in the video, the camera shows a constellation of stars in the shape of the female reproductive system behind Gaga (at around thirty-three seconds into the video, also noted by Zafar 2011). In a fairly graphic scene, Mother Monster is then shown with her feet in chains and leather stirrups. This can be read as pointing to the way many women are made to give birth, for example, female prisoners in America, but also evokes masochism and wish for union with the pre-Oedipal mother. Then, a midwife wearing prosthetic horns on her face helps Gaga deliver pods or eggs covered in slimy bodily fluids. These pods resemble heads, and each is in the image of Gaga's face (if slightly underdeveloped). This is almost an inversion of Medusa's myth, where her head must be removed in order for her children to be born. With the use of a mirror, these heads that do not (yet) have bodies are reflected to produce countless rows which replicate each other. Yet, one of these heads has developed a body, and this 'Little Monster' is played by Lady Gaga.²¹⁵

²¹⁵ For this particular scene, the French artist Orlan criticized Gaga's use of the decapitated head, arguing that it plagiarized her artwork *Woman with Head* (1996).

There is thus a breakdown of boundaries here between Mother Monster and her Little Monsters who mirror each other, a relationship that reflects a similar mesh of identity with her real-life Little Monsters. To explore the use of the head in relation to the abject mother, Kristeva's exhibition held at the *Louvre* (1998) can be used, for she explored the abject in art via Medusa's decapitated head.

As has been mentioned, Kristeva released a book to accompany the exhibition called *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*, where she expanded on *Powers of Horror* by drawing on the myth of Medusa to argue that representations of the severed head in art evoke abjection through death. To quickly reiterate, prior to the onset of language, the infant resides with the pre-Oedipal mother of the Semiotic phase and is totally reliant on her. It is the father of the Symbolic phase (the Symbolic being where the infant learns language and meaning), that the mother is completely abjected in favour of the law of the father, and the infant establishes a sense of 'I' that is separate from the mother. However, this separation from the mother can be traumatic, and the child may feel abandoned (Kristeva 2012, 5). To make sense of this separation, Kristeva argues that: 'most of us replace the absent face, *as loved as it is feared*, source of joy and terror with...a representation' (2012, 5 – emphasis my own).²¹⁶ By representing the abject, particularly the severed head, in art, this sublimates the trauma of the cutting away from the primary source of identification: the maternal body. Further, as a *representation* it will not pose an actual threat, therefore it also sublimates the power of the pre-Oedipal mother who incites terror in the infant for her ability to consume but also the threat of castration in the male. Thus, images of Medusa play to two fears: pre-Oedipal and Oedipal.

²¹⁶ By representing the severed head in art, it also removes the violent instincts towards the mother. Kristeva uses Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913). Freud argued that in skull worshipping, there was clear evidence of acting out a violence towards a father figure, and then relinquishing this guilt by turning the body into a sacred site and eating the body in an act of cannibalism in a 'physical and symbolic appropriation of the father's power' (Kristeva 2012, 15). This is a morally justifiable murder that works through two taboos: murder and incest for both 'go hand in hand' (Kristeva 2012, 15). However, Kristeva argued that in this act, there was also the 'appropriation of the mother's power' (Kristeva 2012, 16). Looking at the skull, reminds the subject of the loss of the gaze of the mother and thus the 'loss of maternal dependence' (Kristeva 2012, 16). Cannibalism is thus to 'absorb the mother's milk of the brain', and the desire to feed from her again: 'I also appropriate it, consume it, I do not want to lose it, I rediscover the pleasure of the archaic orality that this breast, this mass, this head provided me' (Kristeva 2012, 16). In sum:

skull worship commemorated two events: the original loss of the mother, the source of melancholy, and the phallic trial, the threat of the castration by the father. Thus we may read in it a double celebration: that of the rival phallic father and that of the mother who abandoned us, whose features remain to be ploughed (as agrarian culture will do) as well as her face (by evoking Medusa? by paint-ing like Picasso?)
Kristeva 2012, 17.



Fig. 5.2. Giacinto Calandrucci's *Head of Medusa* (Seventeenth Century), Musée du Louvre, Paris. RF 35519, Verso.

One of the images Kristeva considers is Giacinto Calandrucci's drawing *Head of Medusa* (seventeenth century) (fig. 5.2.). The *mixture* of masculine and feminine features in this portrayal of Medusa, Kristeva argues, induces the pre-Oedipal unity of mother and son before they have separated: 'Medusa is abject as primitive matrix of that archaic nondifferentiation in which there is neither subject nor object, only the sticky, slimy abject' (Kristeva 2012, 31). For Kristeva, Medusa is the abject mother who threatens the child's entry into subjectivity, primarily because of the gaze that objectifies and kills (turning one into a corpse, a particular source of abjection) but also because of her consuming genitalia that could return you to the womb: 'Cut off the monster's head and offer its reflection for view: that is the only way to protect yourself from death and the female genital's

that could swallow you' (Kristeva 2012, 30-31).²¹⁷ She reads Perseus and Medusa as reproducing the 'ambivalent passions of the mother-child separation' and posits that Medusa's gaze is the 'inversion of the human gaze that wants, precisely, to capture the horror of the other, to freeze it, to eliminate it' (Kristeva 2012, 30). Therefore, to defeat Medusa, Perseus must look at her as a representation and she extends this analysis of Medusa to artistic depictions of the head that evokes the fear and pleasure associated with the mother. It is by safely gazing upon representations of the severed head that one can slowly come to terms with the guilt of separating from her. To quote Christopher Meredith in his review of Kristeva's *Severed Head*:

In analysis, the icon thereby becomes the very substance of the Medusa myth, and the Medusa myth in turn becomes an icon for the artistic endeavour. Kristeva argues that all mediating images, and especially the religious image, supplants the dangerous presence of the original in favour of the reflected, safe and sanitized representation. The icon is the parent who can no longer kill or abandon... Meredith 2013, 160.

Art is a safe method of looking at the terrifying mother and, used in conjunction with Creed's work, points to why Gaga as a monstrous mother is so appealing to a spectator who can act out their longing for symbiosis with her. Therefore, the bodiless head in Gaga's video, is just

²¹⁷ Kristeva, like many others, reads Medusa's head as the female genitals and equates their power with Medusa's gaze: 'Female vulva, Medusa's head is a slimy, swollen, sticky eye, a black hole, its immobile iris surrounded by ragged lips, folds, pubic hair' (Kristeva 2012, 29).

one more example of how Gaga is constructing herself as a spectacle to be repeatedly looked at by her audience and encourages a maternal relationship with her.²¹⁸

However, if looking at the mother as a representation is ‘safe’, it also reveals that the threat of the mother never truly goes away and even has implications for identity that extends beyond separation. Kristeva argues that one’s identity rests on expiating the mother, yet in her discussion of Benvenuto Cellini’s statue *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* (1545-1554), it is clear that Perseus *needs* Medusa for his identity. Here, Perseus raises the Gorgon’s head next to his own, showing his defeat of and successful castration from the mother. Yet in doing so, he becomes the mother’s reflection. Perseus and Medusa mirror each other because they become direct opposites: ‘an unnerving impression of likeness emerges from this interweaving: lying down – standing, severed – intact, man – woman, old – young’ (Kristeva 2012, 35). As the hero has defeated Medusa, he possesses her image as if it is his:

Benvenuto Cellini’s Perseus makes us see that in the silvering of this mirror resides the triumph over the mother – hence-forth doesn’t the hero possess the representation of her face and head as if they were his? – as well as the eternal confrontation with the anguish of castration.

Kristeva 2012, 35.²¹⁹

Taking Medusa and Perseus as an allegory for the mother and son relationship, it seems that Perseus has not truly separated from the Gorgon. His identity is intrinsically linked with that of Medusa, not just on a superficial level as shown in the mirroring pose, but as his position as a hero. It is only through killing the Gorgon that Perseus reaches a heroic status, and thus his identity rests upon her. Here I suggest there is a paradox. Perseus must separate from Medusa in order not to be ‘consumed’ by her gaze or her genitalia and in order to retain his subjectivity, but he also needs her for his identity. After all, when he looks at Medusa in his shield’s reflection, it is her face that becomes his as if he is looking in the mirror (see fig. 5.3). The threat of the mother never leaves; one is always tied to her. To quote Oliver: ‘Abjection is a way of denying the primal narcissistic identification, almost’ (1993, 60). To separate from the mother is an ‘almost’ impossible task. The inability to truly separate from the mother threatens to undermine the Symbolic which is based on the notion of women’s bodies as unregulated and needing to construct boundaries around them. This is helpful for framing the spectator’s relationship with Gaga’s abject image. I suggest, using mirror theory

²¹⁸ Even if these heads were Little Monsters that Mother Monster has birthed, they are still in the image of the Mother Monster (Gaga), thus showing how one’s identity can become inextricable bound with the mother of the pre-Oedipal stage.

²¹⁹ As mentioned, Medusa continues to threaten men as a symbol of castration anxiety.

below to elaborate that Gaga is not just playing to this want to return to the mother, but also the need of the mother for the creation of identity. Thus, by evoking the monstrous mother, there is a collapse of boundaries between the spectacle and fan who mirror each other.

The Mirror: Part One

According to Kristeva, the infant begins to understand that they must separate from the mother and thus she is viewed as abject for she threatens ones' individuality. The mother as abject is a 'precondition of narcissism' that must come before Jacques Lacan's 'mirror stage', a time when the child *sees* the self as separate from the mother, and thus prior to the Symbolic (1982, 13). Kristeva built upon Lacan's work and, as mentioned in the Introduction, Lacan first introduced his theory of the mirror-stage at a conference in 1936, and claimed that the infant looking at its own reflection was crucial for the formation of the self. This stage takes place when the infant is between six to eighteen months old (before entering the Symbolic order), a time when the infant becomes fascinated with their mirror image, and who takes the reflected image (*imago*) as an *idealised* version of this self (Lacan 1949, 2). Even when there is no mirror, the child begins to see his or herself reflected in the face of the primary caregiver, 'it is the other that functions as a mirror', particularly as the child mimics the actions and behaviour of those around them (Julien 1994, 30). Lacan revised this theory in 1960, adding that the mirror-stage would only be successful if it were validated by a parent, for example, by the parent approving or acknowledging the image in the mirror (Fink 1999, 88). Lacan associated the parent's approval with 'what Freud calls the ego-ideal: a child internalizes its parents' ideals ... comes to see itself as its parents do', and thus the mother or primary caregiver(s) in a sense *become* mirrors (Fink 1999, 88). This use of others as mirrors through which to affirm one's identity continues throughout life by creating one's identity 'in relation to the doubles and (m)others that surround' (Alban 2017, 18).

However, a struggle emerges. If one must look at others as mirrors, then they risk the 'Other' returning their gaze and posing a risk to their subjectivity. Gillian M. E. Alban in her chapter 'The Self in the Petrifying Gaze of the Other' (2017) discusses this struggle by

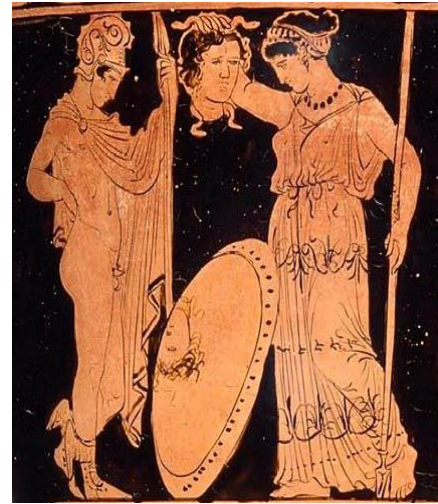


Fig. 5.3. Perseus safely looks at the Gorgon's reflected image on Athena's shield. Both Perseus and Athena avoid looking at her head directly. Apulian Red Figure Krater, attributed to the Tarporley Painter, ca 400 - 385 B.C. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 1970.237.

connecting Lacan's work with Medusa. She uses Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* that argues that the look of the Other is Medusa's gaze, it threatens to objectify (Sartre 1943, 555). There is a battle between who is looking at whom, one that is mitigated in the myth by posing Medusa's image as a reflection, a *representation* of the mother. In the same sense, Gaga is also a representation that can be looked at safely by the viewer's gaze, even encouraging this objectification, but who does not pose an actual threat to the spectator who can freely use her as a mirror to reflect their own identity. However, there is another problem that emerges with the mirror stage. Lacan constructed his theory in response to the white male's reflection that, when reflected with images or people that did not look or behave like him, could 'shatter one's self image and esteem' (Alban 2017, 17). Lacan did not consider queer people for whom finding images or people that reflect positive affirmations of themselves is much more difficult. Gaga thus becomes a monster that offers a positive reflection to her queer audience to revel and embrace their differences.

The Mirror: Part Two

This notion of Gaga being a mirror can be explored further. As Mother Monster says in her manifesto, on the same day that she created her new race there was also the birth of evil. Gaga as the Mother then splits herself into two, 'rotating in agony between two ultimate forces' ('Manifesto', Lady Gaga). As the camera ventures into hell, Gaga is shown as the bad mother, who pulls a machine gun from her vagina, hinting at her death giving qualities rather than life giving. The manifesto ends with Gaga clutching her machine gun as she says:

It seems easy, you imagine
To gravitate instantly and unwaveringly towards good
But she wondered, 'How can I protect something so perfect without evil?'
Lady Gaga, The Manifesto of Mother Monster.

The split between the good and the bad mother plays to the ambivalence of the mother within Kristeva's abjection, but also to Melanie Klein's theory of projective identification (which Kristeva used as inspiration for her theory). Klein's theory posits that the young infant splits the mother, as the primary object, into the good mother (or breast) that meets the infant's wants, or the bad mother (or breast that is abjected) who leaves the child wanting ('On Identification' 1955). The mother is key for the construction of *identity*. The primary splitting of the mother creates a split in the ego, and the child projects good and bad aspects of the self onto the mother and thus 'she is not then felt to be a separate individual but an aspect of the self' (Klein 'On the Sense of Loneliness' 1963, 303). The mother is used by the child as a

mirror on to which they can affirm aspects they like about themselves, but they can also abject the bad parts that they dislike about themselves onto the mother as well. This splitting and object relations theory has a profound impact throughout life. Objects (people or symbols of people such as the breast) can be split, and aspects of the self projected onto them as part of a projective identification. Klein notes that ‘as the ego develops, splitting and projection lessen and the ego becomes more integrated’ (1963, 303). However, if the ego is weak from difficulties in early life, this may cause anxiety and excessive splitting and projection where the ego becomes increasingly fragmented, and this she argues is found in cases of *schizophrenia* (Klein 1963, 303). Although two distinct models, Lacan and Klein’s theories both propose that the mother can be used as a symbolic mirror and who becomes crucial for the formation of one’s identity.

Cornel Sandvoss, who has conducted a number of studies on fandom, uses Klein’s projective identification in relation to fan relationships with celebrities in *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (2005), to argue that fans may use celebrities as mirrors to construct their own identities. According to Sandvoss, fans may split the pop star into good (nurturing) and bad (rebellious side) (2005, 81). Using Klein’s theory of projective identification, he argues:

...following the recognition of the star as good object, allows for the adoption of particular aspects of the representation of the star in the presentation of the fan’s self by replicating physical appearances or a distinct habitus. In particular fantasies of resemblance allow for this simultaneously projective and introjection relationship between fans and object in which the star is first realized as good object and subsequently integrated into the self through introjection.
Sandvoss 2005, 81.

Fans imitate Gaga and incorporate aspects of her into their own identity, be it dressing up as her, absorbing her positive messages of inclusivity, or adopting the collective symbol of the Little Monster by putting their ‘paws up’. Rather than this being a mental health issue related to schizophrenia, as discussed, it is almost a controlled form of projection that can have positive implications (as was found by Click et al 2013). Further, as Klein mentions, this splitting is usually symptomatic of those who have experienced some form of anxiety or trauma. Many of Gaga’s fans relate to Gaga because of a shared experience of bullying (Click et al 2013), and thus Gaga is somewhat of an empowering, positive reflection. They can use Gaga to affirm and build their own identities by first projecting onto her and then absorbing her positive affirmations of self-love as well as her re-articulation of the monstrous as a positive symbol for the ‘Other’. However, through her use of the Mother Monster that evokes

the pre-Oedipal mother, I am arguing that it is Gaga who *encourages* this relationship and for her fans to use her as a mirror on which to construct their identities. I argue that this breakdown of identities between Mother Monster and her Little Monsters also manifests in the video in the form of hybridity.

Hybridity

Up till now, I have focused on the first half of the music video where there is this narrative and manifesto. It is finally at around two minutes and thirty-three seconds that the song actually begins. It is at this point that the Mother Monster is no longer portrayed onscreen, and the video exclusively focuses on Gaga as a Little Monster. As a Little Monster, Gaga takes a range of different roles. During this part of the video, Gaga first emerges as a blonde, skinny, attractive pop star, with prosthetic horns on her face that are the only remnants of visual monstrosity.²²⁰ Gaga here is a hybrid. The horns she wears draw some comparison with the unicorn (another hybrid) in the video, and later she will become a zombie (a hybrid as it is a living corpse and one of the most abject images in a religious context, as it is ‘the body without a soul’ [Creed 1993a, 10]).²²¹ The abject mother has given birth to hybrid creatures, and there is a thorough breakdown of boundaries between herself and her children who share a monstrosity that arguably points to the breakdown in distinct identities between Mother Monster and her real life Little Monsters.

When Gaga takes the role of a zombie, she performs next to Canadian model Rick Genest who is also known as ‘Zombie Boy’. Genest, who took his own life in 2018, had tattooed the entirety of his body so that he became a ‘real-life’ zombie. Gaga’s make-up juxtaposed with Genest’s permanent tattoos again points to the pop star as *performing* the abject (Williams 2017, 158). It is this zombie scene that Richard Gray (2012) suggests is inspired by Francis Bacon’s *Self Portrait* (1973), a painting that shows a distorted face. Gaga had spoken of the Surrealist influences on ‘Born This Way’: ‘It’s very inspired (...), especially in the beginning, (by) Salvador Dali and Francis Bacon...It’s this story about the birth of this new race’ (qtd. in Gray 2012, 125). Thus, Gray suggests that Bacon’s *Self*

²²⁰ The same kind worn by the midwife earlier. The horns are worn on the forehead and shoulders and French artist Orlan further accused Gaga of plagiarism for allegedly copying her work, *Bumpload* (1989), a sculpture of Orlan with horns. Orlan argued that Gaga had copied her use of artistic hybridity, for Orlan had earlier *physically* implanted horns into her skin whereas Gaga’s were simply make-up. However, her accusation was unsuccessful and Paris’ High Court said that ‘the idea of turning the human body into a hybrid being is an artistic concept that should remain free’ (qtd. in Corner 2016).

²²¹ Further, on the album cover for *Born This Way* Gaga became another hybrid as a half human and half motorbike.

Portrait and Gaga's zombie show the face as both human and monstrous, and Gray argues that this 'emphasises the process through which "pathologized or stigmatised objects may become subjects"' (Gray 2012, 126). For Gray, Gaga takes death, the corpse, and turns it into an 'object of beauty' as her zombie character is aesthetically pleasing (Gray 2012, 126). The zombie can therefore be read as another way in which Gaga is re-articulating the monstrous and, as the video ends, zombie-Gaga is shown in a pink heart blowing bubble gum with her hair tied in a high ponytail. She is presented, not as Mother Monster, but as child-like who is growing alongside her fans and as a woman who has given birth to herself as an agent over her own image and identity (Davisson 2013, 44).²²²

The notion of a monstrous mother giving birth to hybrid creatures draws interesting parallels with Medusa's mythology. As has been mentioned, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, after being decapitated by Perseus, Medusa gives birth to her hybrid children, Pegasus and Chrysaor. Medusa is thus portrayed as a monstrous mother who carries her unborn children in her neck, rather than her uterus, as if she had orally consumed them (again aligning Medusa's head with her genitalia). This idea of Medusa consuming her children, leads to a reading of her as the abject mother who threatens her children's entry into subjectivity. This results in her children being born, not just as monsters like their mother, but monstrous *hybrids* because, as the Symbolic collapses (for the mother is reluctant to relinquish control over her children), so do boundaries. I argue that the hybrid monsters in Gaga's video similarly point to this Symbolic breakdown, while also pointing to how her 'real life' Little Monsters incorporate Gaga into their identities, and thus, in a sense, use Gaga to create their own hybrid identity.²²³

I also suggest that the vulnerability of the Symbolic stage is also evident in the *Metamorphoses* via poetry and language. In her study of the *Metamorphoses*, literary scholar Lynn Enterline (2000) interprets Medusa as the *mother of poetry*. This is interesting as it is the Gorgon's son, the hybrid Pegasus born from a rape and a monstrous abject mother, which establishes this connection. The *Metamorphoses* details how Pegasus' hooves created the Hippocrene spring, which was said to inspire poets, and, as Pegasus was created from Medusa's blood, 'Medusa's blood gives birth to poetry' for she is 'the fountain's "mother"'

²²² The idea of giving birth to oneself is an important theme in queer communities, where people embrace their own identity by 'reinventing' themselves.

²²³ As Felton notes, for the ancient Greeks: 'that women could also sometimes produce children with physical abnormalities only added to the perception of women as potentially terrifying and destructive' (2012, 105).

(Enterline 2000, 79-80 using Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 5.259). It is literature, and particularly poetry, that Kristeva regarded as confronting the reader with the abject/Semiotic stage before the onset of language:

We encounter this discourse in our dreams of death depriving us of the assurance of mechanical use of speech ordinarily gives us, the assurance of being ourselves, that is, untouchable, unchangeable, immortal. But the writer is permanently confronted with such language. The writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death: instead he comes to life again in signs.
Kristeva 1982, 38.

The writer understands the limitations of language and thus uses imagery to convey meaning when language falters. Language is established during the Symbolic order by the *father* when the subject becomes part of a 'signifying system' where objects have names and meaning, rather than the subject simply being driven by desires (Covino 2004, 19). It is what separates the subject from the mother and the Semiotic order, and a time where the child learns about 'disgust' and thus abjects the mother as a form of pollutant that threatens the clean body and sense of 'I'. Poetry shows the fragility of language, which the Symbolic (patriarchy) so relies on to give cultural meaning and definitions, and thus reveals the instability of patriarchy.

Enterline (2000) uses Medusa's myth as an example of the poet's anxieties regarding the unpredictable nature of language, its limitations, and the dissonance between mind and speech. This is slightly ironic as Medusa is not given a voice when she is alive (that is, her perspective is never given) and literally loses her voice when she is executed by Perseus. Thus, her speechless mouth acts as a portent for her ability to take away the speech of her victims (Enterline 2000, 79-81). This is particularly evident during Perseus' fight with Phineus (Andromeda's uncle and to whom she was initially intended to marry). When Perseus shows his opponents the head of Medusa, there is focus on how Medusa takes away their voice: 'But his final words were cut off as he said them. To judge by his open lips, you'd suppose that he wanted to speak, but the sounds couldn't find a way through' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.190-194). Medusa therefore symbolises the disconnect between the mind and the mouth. Another tale taken from *Metamorphoses* that Enterline uses as an example of the fallible nature of language is the myth of Daphne, mentioned in the previous chapter. Firstly, Apollo, the god of poetry, fails to seduce the nymph ('Stop, dear Daphne, I beg you to stop!' [Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.504]). Secondly, when Daphne calls for her father to change her, her father interprets her call to change her form by turning her into a tree when, in fact,

Enterline argues that Daphne may simply have been asking for him to take away her beauty that had attracted Apollo's lust (Enterline 2000, 79). Ovid thus also connects rape with the voice and poetry. As Enterline states: 'Ovid so insistently allies the origin of poetry with rape. In an Ovidian universe, subjects may be just as "carried away" by words (the original sense of *raptus*) as by implacable lovers' (2000, 78). However, rape also leads to the loss of the voice of the female victims. Medusa and Daphne are just two examples that point to the inability to 'speak about the unspeakable' (Enterline 2000, 88). Yet, as Ovid is the *poet*, it also points to his loss for words; his inability to convey certain meaning. Thus, as Enterline says, these tales speak to 'the subject's phonographic alienation from its own voice' (2000, 89). Women's bodies in the *Metamorphoses* are thus repeatedly used to show the imperfect nature of language and can thus be read as posing a threat to the Symbolic. This connection between rape, hybridity, and language is also found in Gaga. As a singer, she is akin to a poet who uses metaphors and imagery, which show the limitation of language to convey meaning, and again points to the breakdown of language. Therefore, Gaga as a singer who plays with the monstrous could be considered as deconstructing patriarchy, all the while retaining the use of her voice, unlike the rape victims in the *Metamorphoses*.

There are further distinctions to be drawn here with Medusa and the notion of the abject. In Medusa's story, it appears that she is turned into a monster because she is raped in a sacred space. Roman temples (*templum*), much like the ancient Greek ones, were designated areas that created a parameter and a distinct boundary between non-sacred and sacred spaces (Lennon 2013, 44). A return to Mary Douglas' work is useful here to understand notions of the sacred and pollution in the ancient world. As has been mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, the Greek word for pollution is *miasma*, a term used not to 'denote physical dirt, but rather signifies ritual impurity that can be dangerous or contaminating' and thus much like Douglas' argument above (Petrovic and Petrovic 2016, 27), and while the Romans held similar beliefs, there is no one direct equivalent word in Latin (2012, 43). In both ancient Greece and Rome, one was not to enter a temple if they were in some way 'polluted', be that if they had recently given birth or had sex.²²⁴ In ancient Rome, in order to 'clean' oneself before entering a temple, a period of abstinence had to be taken (Lennon 2013, 61). Therefore, in the myth of

²²⁴ While there is clear evidence of menstrual blood also being a form of *miasma* in the Greek world, the Roman evidence is a little less clear, but still suggests a similar belief (see Lennon 2013, 87). As Medusa is interpreted by some modern scholars as a manifestation of concerns regarding menstrual blood, Mulvey-Roberts posits that Medusa was given snake hair by Minerva because of a 'religious sacrilege, possibly combined with menstrual sexual transgression' (2005, 151).

Medusa, there is a clear violation of these rules of contamination, and thus Minerva's temple becomes polluted. However, so does Medusa's *body*. Rape has repeatedly been used as a weapon to violate women's bodies and, in the process, 'polluting' women. This can be explored in a number of ways. For example, it relates to the sense that once women are 'defiled' or are no longer virgins, they lose their 'appeal' in certain patriarchal societies and can lead to a loss of status and subsequent exclusion.²²⁵ Yet, rape at its most basic level invades women's bodies, as the penetrative act crosses the boundary into the self: 'it is the border-crossing practice par-excellence, transforming one's inner being into an abject' (Diken and Laustsen 2005, 120-121). Rape is another way of associating women's bodies with the abject and thus, after being raped, Medusa becomes an abject monster. There is also a connection to a sense of shame in the female rape victim who may blame herself because of a patriarchal culture that places onus on women who 'invite' male attention, as has been discussed in the previous chapter. This sense of shame is connected to sin and guilt by Diken and Laustsen (2005) because it becomes a form of 'internalized pollution' (2005, 121).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Gaga said that she had blamed herself for the sexual assault. Taking Diken and Laustsen's work, this sense of shame or sin becomes a form of abjection. However, I also suggest that Gaga subverts this. As a victim of male violence, Gaga controls her own narrative by creating her own monstrous persona. In doing so, Gaga's sense of abjection is much more complex than Medusa's who becomes 'contaminated' through no fault of her own. Rather, Gaga willingly becomes abject to play to notions already surrounding 'impure' women's bodies for her own means and to empower others. She becomes a manifestation of patriarchal concerns regarding the separation of 'pollutants' and 'cleanliness' by using her image to bring the abject to the fore, and in a sense, removing the Otherness and shame that surrounds it to reveal that it is *constructed*.

As a final thought, I will consider one last piece of fan art that depicts Gaga as Medusa. Whereas the previous chapter focused on art of Gaga that either directly played to *The Fame Monster* or her *Versace* connection, this piece lends a different perspective, one that is rich with the themes discussed in this chapter.

²²⁵ There is also the case of women giving birth to the child who is the product of this rape that can be viewed as 'an abject: an alien and disgusting object. The abject, in this case, is neither fully inside (the child is never hers), nor fully outside (she feels polluted by it)' (Diken and Laustsen 2005,113).

Fan Art

Uploaded onto the site *Deviant Art* (a platform where ‘deviants’ can share their work) on the eighteenth of July 2012, user *RoudInWonderland* had created a digital art piece called *Lady Gaga vs Medusa* that shows Gaga as a Medusa with the Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio’s *Medusa* (1597) looking on at her in the background. Very little is revealed about *RoudInWonderland* apart from his gender (male), date of birth (born in 1993), and location (Italy), as well as his favourite visual artist (Lady Gaga). However, that members are referred to as ‘deviants’ does point to the idea that this is a site where those who may feel a little different can be expressive. The piece is a digital collage of images placed together (fig. 5.4.). The main image is of Gaga taken from the advert for her *Fame* perfume (2012) and she is shown naked, except for a mask that covers half her face (dominatrix in style – and thus possibly evoking the wish for a masochistic relationship that recreates the pre-Symbolic relationship with the dominant mother) with small men climbing over her body (in the advert she is a giant whereas, in this piece, using the other objects for reference, she seems to be ‘human’ size). The men congregate around her breasts and genitals to make Gaga viewer-friendly (but also feeds into the idea of the appeal of Mother Monster and the wish to feed on the breast and re-enter the womb). *Roud* has given Gaga snake hair that is blurred as if moving, and in her left hand she holds what looks like a south Italian red-figure pot, maybe a Campanian or Apulian skyphos. The pot shows a woman holding, like Gaga, an object in her left hand that looks like a box (mirroring in some respects Gaga’s pose). This pot replaces what was previously in Gaga’s hand: her bottle of *Fame* perfume. It is not just the sense of sight that works to blur boundaries, Gaga in this advert was also alluding to something else that is sharable: scent.



Fig. 5.4. *Lady Gaga vs Medusa, RoudInWonderland* (2012)

This was Gaga's first venture into the perfume industry and the marketing for the product is unique and very Gaga-esque. The perfume liquid is black in colour but, when sprayed, turns transparent so that it does not stain the user's clothes (the first of its kind). The bottle is egg shaped (again evoking Gaga as a mother) and the lid is in the shape of a claw which can be read as a reference to the signature paw sign of the Little Monsters.²²⁶ When promoting the perfume, Gaga said that it contained blood and semen which was obviously not true but certainly played to Gaga's monstrous persona. Gaga also said: 'The fragrance is called *Fame*. It must be black. It must be enticing. You must want to lick and touch and feel it, but the look of it must terrify you' (qtd. in Macatee 2012). Again, like her Mother Monster, it is the push and pull to which Gaga plays. The colour change of the liquid encapsulates Gaga's notion of 'fame' which is enticing but has a dark underlay, yet Gaga has many notions of what 'fame' means to her. She has previously said that 'fame' was being true to yourself, regardless of what society says and that it is available to anyone (Davisson 2013, 25). By presenting her idea of fame as 'shareable' Gaga again positions herself alongside her fans while offering the idea of a shareable scent. After all, surely fans buy celebrities' perfumes as a way of 'getting closer' to their idols, even to smell like them?

The use of the perfume advert in *RoudInWonderland's* art piece points to Gaga's use of the Mother Monster as a marketing tactic, but there also other emerging themes that reflect many of the ideas considered in this chapter. Firstly, in the background of Lady Gaga is

²²⁶ Afterall, Gaga did arrive at the Grammy Awards (2011) in an egg to promote 'Born This Way', which was to be performed for the first time during the show.

Caravaggio's painting *Medusa*. The original, now found at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, was painted onto a wooden shield, and was meant to replicate the reflected image of Medusa as it would have been found on Perseus' shield. This painting is thus a representation of a reflection. Perseus initially reflects Medusa's image on his shield in order to subdue her power. As a mirror image, her image is safe to look at.²²⁷ By Perseus representing Medusa, he has overcome her threat as he can avoid her gaze which he steals for himself and *then*: 'he can re-present her through his own narrative; she has become part of his story' (Walker 1998, 53). The mirror is used to mitigate the threat of the powerful woman here and this is doubled by Caravaggio. This male artist is 're-presenting' Medusa's face which, like Giacinto Calandrucci's, is masculine and feminine. While it has long been thought that Medusa is modelled on Caravaggio's own face, Alan Singer in *The Self-Deceiving Muse* (2010) says that the artist used a male model called Mario for this piece and other works such as *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (1594-6) (2010, 91). Yet, for the spectator who realises that this is Mario's image, there is an instant understanding that this is a 'signature of Caravaggio's oeuvre' and becomes a 'recognition of the painter's ego (a kind of self-portrait)' (Singer 2010, 91).

If this artwork can be interpreted as a self-portrait, then Medusa becomes the mirrored representation of Caravaggio.²²⁸ Using Kristeva's *Severed Head*, this is the visual representation of the mother, the threat that this male artist who becomes akin to Perseus, has overcome through creating the mother's image. Medusa is thus repeatedly man's reflection, literally and figuratively as a mirror reflection and as the product of male writing.²²⁹ She is constructed as an abject monster, the embodiment of male fears regarding female difference and power, yet even after she has been subjugated, her threat to subjectivity remains.²³⁰ This, I propose, reflects patriarchal reliance upon the use of the monstrous as a symbol to generate fear towards the 'Other'. Yet, using the work of Kristeva, looking at 'safe' representations of severed heads also plays to that longing for the mother.

²²⁷ I do not take the interpretation of Medusa petrifying herself as used in Louis Marin's analysis of Caravaggio's painting in 'To Destroy Painting' (1977). This is a misreading of the myth but also Medusa is not looking at herself in this image. Her eyes are averted and in horror in brief recognition of her own demise as she looks down at her decapitated body, not her reflected image.

²²⁸ I am reminded of a passage taken from *Water & Women in Past, Present & Future* (2007). In Freud's reading of Narcissus, he reads the grass that surrounds the pool of water (that produces the mirror reflection) as the mother's genitals. Therefore 'the narcissist can be seen as seeking his own image within the frame of the mother's body' (Segal 1988, 8-9 qtd. in Parente-Čapková 2007, 204).

²²⁹ Literally because, as a self-portrait, Caravaggio and Medusa's identities become entwined. Figuratively because, as a product of male artists and writers, Medusa can be read as the reflection of male fears.

²³⁰ See above in relation to Perseus' reliance upon Medusa for his identity.

The use of reflection in the Caravaggio's artwork is useful for framing an analysis of *RoudInWonderland's* piece. Caravaggio's Medusa in *Roud's* art reflects Lady Gaga as both figures are Gorgons, therefore adding to this notion of looking at the abject mother and a blurring of boundaries. Yet, the title of this piece is *Lady Gaga vs Medusa*; Gaga and Caravaggio's Medusa are pitted against one another. I propose that this suggests a split that evokes Melanie Klein's good and bad mother. I read Caravaggio's Medusa as the Gorgon who is created by *men* and who embodies the negative connotations of the maternal monster, who threatens subjectivity and must be beheaded. She can be read as the *bad* mother, and what Jane M. Ussher refers to as the 'devil mummy...lurking inside every mother' (2006, 49). In contrast, Gaga creates her own image, she constructs herself as a Mother Monster.²³¹ Gaga is the woman who plays to misogynistic fears over women's liminal bodies, that are repeatedly depicted as monstrous or polluted (even when raped as a form of victim blaming), using it to seduce the gaze and as a positive symbol. She becomes the Medusa that reflects a positive re-articulation of the monstrous. She is the good mother and, I argue, a modern Medusa.

Conclusion

Both chapters within this thesis that concern Lady Gaga were initially inspired by fan depictions of her as Medusa. Using Medusa to frame Gaga's appropriation of the monstrous, I have argued that the pop star manipulates her image in order to play to misogynistic fears and depictions of women as monsters because of their reproductive bodies. In the first of these two chapters, I stated that Gaga's initial use of the monstrous draws parallels with Medusa's tale in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. After both Medusa and Lady Gaga are subjected to male violence, they turn into castrating monsters. The crucial difference is that Gaga transforms *herself*. In doing so, Gaga controls her own image, and plays to male fears of the biting female genitals. Gaga's monster becomes a source of protection and empowerment for Gaga *and* her fans. By calling her fans Little Monsters, Gaga invites them to identify with the monster. This is achieved visually in the music video through Gaga's role as a *femme castratrice*. In this early use of the monstrous, Gaga reclaims the monster as a positive symbol. Gaga is viewed as a protector by her fans and this manifests in fan art depictions of Gaga as the Gorgon, a monster who has an apotropaic function.

²³¹ I understand how this may seem contradictory. Gaga here is created by *RoudInWonderland* as Medusa. However, he is simply interpreting Gaga's existing manipulation of her appearance into a monster.

In this chapter, I explored this unique dynamic with her fans further by using themes that are present in both Medusa's myth and Gaga's 'Born This Way' video. By applying a Medusa lens to read Gaga, I have argued that as Mother Monster to her Little Monsters, she further encourages a shared monstrous identity and blurring of boundaries between fan and artist. In 'Born This Way', Gaga becomes visually abject as a Mother Monster who secretes and gives birth to other monsters who are in her image. Thus, she is again playing to the unconscious desires for the mother, but this time in pre-Oedipal terms. Rather than repeating patriarchal fears of women's bodies and reducing women to their maternal functions, Gaga plays with monstrous images to attract the gaze of her audience. Further, through her exaggerated performance of abjection, Gaga highlights how misogynistic views of women's bodies are *constructed*. Patriarchal societies, with their constructed notions of pollution and taboo, view the female body as more aligned with nature, disgust, and shame, because uncontrolled bodily fluids transgress the body's boundaries. This in turn is used to justify the need to control women. Yet, by Gaga playing to this, she is bringing together the image of the beautiful pop star with the 'disgust' of the mother's monstrous body, and she threatens to spill out of constructed boundaries. In doing so, she arguably appeals to the subjects' longing for a reunion with the pre-Oedipal mother, and to a time without shame or embarrassment, but blissful union. This not only benefits her fans who view her as a site of identification and a maternal figure, but also adds to her appeal and her own need to attract the gaze of her fans to heighten her popularity and success as a star. Using the monster and abjection as a method to appeal to her audience, I argue that Gaga encourages her fans to view her as a mirror and to incorporate the monstrous as part of their identities. Fans are thus creating their identities and image based on Gaga, and thus it is not only Gaga who is in control of her image, but her fans. While her Little Monsters may have been subjected to bullying and received insults based on their appearance, by being taken under Gaga's maternal wing they too are owning their image via the monstrous. Therefore, by reappropriating the monster that has historically been used to demonise others based on differences, Gaga shows that 'by recognizing the Other and the abject as part of ourselves, we can . . . overcome the need to find victims, scapegoats, enemies' (Wisker 2016, 53).

Gaga, alongside the other pop stars in this thesis, has shown the need to interrogate patriarchal narratives that designate women's bodies as monstrous. By rewriting the monstrous-feminine and subverting these narratives, these pop stars are disrupting, and deconstructing, power dynamics and structures.

Conclusion

This study has explored an under-researched and exciting area: the reappropriation of Medusa in pop music. I have analysed four female pop stars, who have been read as, or became Medusa, in individual case studies. While Medusa has been repeatedly used to demonise powerful women, I have argued that something *different* is going on here and that Medusa must be returned to and updated as a figure through which images of women onscreen can be read. Each pop star in this study engages with the monstrous in her own unique way to entice the gaze of their audience. Thus, while this study has sought to understand the Gorgon's continued resonance with modern audiences, it has also postulated a new way of using Medusa to explore modes of spectatorial identification between pop stars and their fans to argue, contrary to some early feminist film theorists, that women can be powerful when they are looked *at* and that they possess the gaze.

Medusa is an ambivalent figure who continues to fascinate modern recipients of her myth(s). In the ancient world, Medusa was not the subject of one story but could be a monster, a victim, or even an African queen. Consistently, however, Medusa was denied a voice and reduced to a monstrous obstacle to be subjugated by a male hero. She is one of the most well remembered monsters from Greco-Roman mythology for a variety of reasons. She was a popular motif in the ancient world as an apotropaic icon, but she is also immediately identifiable because of her snake hair and her unique gaze that turned anyone who looked at her to stone. Due to her unique attributes, Medusa continues to be a source of inspiration. As this thesis has discussed, it is predominantly her gaze that led her to be used as part of Freud's Oedipus Complex and, in response, feminist film theory. Yet, Medusa's myth is ongoing, it is still developing. Myths, much like other narratives such as fairy tales, can be developed to reflect society's changing attitudes and beliefs, and women are engaging with these narratives and the monstrous in new ways, and that includes Medusa. Thus, rather than viewing Medusa through a male lens, women are directly engaging with the Gorgon and re-writing her story to give Medusa, and themselves, a voice. Women in the twentieth century onwards have reappropriated her as a feminist symbol of oppression, a rape victim, and a silenced woman; but also, a powerful figure of female authority, or even a figure of Black women's empowerment (to name a few).

Medusa continues to evolve alongside women's changing positions in society, and thus the way she has been used by Freud, and how this in turn has been used by feminist film

theorists, needs revisiting. Unlike Freud's reading of the Gorgon as a monstrous woman who embodies male fears and desires surrounding women's bodies and their sex 'difference', Medusa is far more complex. This, I have argued, points to the limitations of early feminist film theory that used Freud's theory uncritically to read images of women onscreen and the dynamics of the gaze. This thesis has argued that there needs to be a return to Medusa and has suggested new ways she can be used to read images of women that offers a more nuanced and empowering stance that considers the multiple identities, desires, and the subsequent 'gazes' at work.

To recap, Freud read Medusa's head as a symbol of the female genitals that both attract and incite fear in men and was used to further outline his Oedipus Complex. As Freud argued that myths are akin to dreams in that they are manifestations of unconscious fears and desires, Medusa becomes the 'castrated' female genitals that provoke male castration anxiety. To overcome these fears, the male must take the position of Perseus who subjugates Medusa by looking at her (via his shield's reflection) and fetishizing her. The Freudian fetish is a replacement object that distracts the gaze away from the woman's site of 'castration'. In Medusa's case, her snake hair can be taken as the pubic hair but can also be read as phallic symbols that disguise her castration and assuage the male's fear. Freud's theory was hugely influential to early feminist film theorists who used psychoanalysis to read images of women onscreen. Drawing from Freudian theory, Laura Mulvey argued that woman onscreen is simply a passive image to be looked at by an exclusively male gaze that reduces her to a fetish object that serves to appease his castration anxiety. In her follow up essay, 'Afterthoughts' (1981), she used Perseus and Andromeda to argue that film, like myth, can only be pleasurable to women if they adopt the 'male gaze' as part of a trans-sex identification. For Mulvey, women onscreen are repeatedly reduced to passive objects. Teresa de Lauretis in *Alice Doesn't* (1984) also adopted Freudian theory to argue that film narratives, like myths and fairy tales, are Oedipal in structure. She used Medusa's myth to argue that women in the cinema audience are repeatedly coerced into identifying with or desiring the passive woman onscreen, rather than her active (or monstrous) counterpart. While de Lauretis argued that women can look, that they can possess the gaze, she read film as seducing women into femininity. Although de Lauretis took a less cynical view in her later works, these later arguments were not framed by using Medusa.

Viewing women onscreen in exclusively Oedipal terms as subordinated images with little room for subversive potential is reductive. Thus, the above framework, which uses

Medusa to argue that woman onscreen is a passive spectacle, and who is trapped in an Oedipal narrative that primarily speaks to male fears and desires, is not helpful for my reading of the chosen female pop stars of this thesis. These pop stars, I have argued, are in control of their image, and use existing narratives of monstrous women to subversively shake-up the status quo. Further, these women are all *different*; they are clearly using the monstrous and Medusa in very different ways and, therefore, reducing women to a homogeneous category is not useful. There has to be an awareness of the differences between women, as well as the diverse audience that is watching them. Therefore, there *must* be a return to Medusa that escapes or updates feminist film theory's use of Freud's reading to show that women onscreen can be powerful images, cannot be reduced to male fears or desires regarding sex differences, and offer a more inclusive reading of diverse images of women onscreen and the spectators that constitute their audience.

Engaging with the Monster

Each pop star in this thesis has used existing monstrous feminine tropes that embody male fears of women to construct their appearance. I began this thesis with Rihanna and Azealia Banks, two women who become the Gorgon in a magazine shoot and music video, respectively. That these two Black musicians chose to embody Medusa is deeply significant. The Gorgon has repeatedly been used as a derogative slur aimed towards Black men and women because of the texture of Black hair which is different to European hair. It is a method of designating, particularly Black women, as 'Other'. However, by becoming Medusa, Rihanna and Banks reclaim the Gorgon as an empowering Black female symbol and strongly connect themselves to the ancient world, which has a history of being appropriated to support white supremacist ideology.

While these two women explicitly reappropriate Medusa, the other two pop stars of this thesis, Madonna and Lady Gaga, do not. However, they are read as the Gorgon by others, and I have shown how a Medusa lens can be applied to read their engagement with the monstrous as part of their image and persona. By first considering Madonna, it is clear that she has been inspired by the figures of the vamp (often played by Marlene Dietrich) and the 'dumb blonde' or 'unruly woman' (played by Marilyn Monroe). These figures were both found in films from two post-war periods and reflected male anxieties of changed gender roles in society. Both Dietrich's and Monroe's characters were blonde (dyed), glamorous women, and they used their feminine appearance to manipulate the male gaze. Their

glamorous exterior concealed their deceptive nature and enabled them to seduce men into getting what they want, often feminising their male ‘victims’ in the process. These women, therefore, possess an internal monstrosity. Parodying these women, Madonna subversively copied their dyed blonde and glamorous appearances, and it led comedienne Julie Brown to mock her unoriginality and to read her as a pop star who would use her overt sexuality to fixate the gaze of her audience, as if they had been looking at the Gorgon. Much like Madonna, Lady Gaga is inspired by men’s fear of women that manifests in literature and onscreen as monstrous. Unlike Madonna, however, Gaga is drawn to *visual* monstrosity. This is twofold. In her early use of the monster, Gaga seemed to be inspired by the monstrous notion of the vagina dentata and men’s unconscious fear of women’s *castrating* genitals. As her use of the monster progressed into a ‘Mother Monster’, Gaga played with notions of the abject female body, i.e., women’s bodies that are reduced to their reproductive functions and which are deemed threatening to constructed societal boundaries.

Each pop star draws on existing monstrous narratives and are all linked with the Gorgon in some way, and it shows that this mythical figure is still relevant in the modern world. By returning to Medusa’s myth(s) and the dynamics of her gaze, the Gorgon can be applied to read these four pop stars to reveal why they are using the monstrous to construct their appearances, how they are creating their own narratives to reveal aspects of their own female identity, and to explore the relationship between the pop star’s image and the spectator.

Re-writing the Monster’s Narrative

Throughout this thesis, it becomes clear that these pop stars are not just repeating these monstrous tropes but are creating their *own* narratives. In doing so, they challenge the way women can use their image to give themselves, and as I shall return to below, their fans, a voice. Much like Medusa, who has repeatedly been viewed through a male lens as a monstrous woman, these pop stars are challenging the way women have repeatedly been designated by men as monstrous Others.

In each case study of this thesis, I have taken one specific theme from the myth(s) of Medusa to read each pop star. Explored under the theme of hair, Rihanna poses on the front of *GQ* as Medusa, in what I interpret as revealing her pride in her Black identity. While Medusa has repeatedly been used as a derogative slur towards Black men and women because of the locked hair that, in some people’s view, resembles Medusa’s snakes, Rihanna

challenges this negative association by becoming Medusa, a Black woman, proudly displaying her 'natural' hair. As Medusa has frequently been used to denigrate Black women as 'Other', and Dorothea Smartt read the Medusa myth as a white man first viewing a Black woman and crying out that she was a monster, Rihanna reclaims Medusa as a symbol of Black beauty and pride. Azealia Banks, like Rihanna, in her role as Medusa, also uses the Gorgon subversively to make a racial commentary, although in a very different way. Explored under the topic of Medusa's skin, rapper Azealia Banks did not simply become Medusa, but covered her own Black skin with white make-up to become a hybrid of the Gorgon and the fairy tale character the Snow Queen, for her 'Ice Princess' music video. Medusa in the ancient world was repeatedly located in Libya, and many feminists have argued that she was a Black woman. I have thus interpreted Banks' video as a commentary on the lack, or negation, of Black women in both mythical and fairy tale narratives, while also acknowledging that these narratives have, sometimes unwittingly, been used to promote white superiority. Applying this to other areas of her work, Azealia Banks continues to combine Greco-Roman myths with fairy tales, especially for her onstage persona of the mermaid. In doing so, Banks creates her own narrative by combining different tales to create something *new*, and a tale where she, a Black woman, shakes up the status-quo.

While the dynamics of the gaze have been explored throughout this thesis, in my analysis of Madonna I returned to Medusa's myth to argue that both women are powerful when looked at, and this argument set the precedent for how Medusa can be used to read women who do not explicitly become the Gorgon. Dietrich and Monroe play characters that knowingly play to, and undermine, the male gaze, and it is particularly Dietrich's vamp that plays to pre-Oedipal desires. Dietrich's vamp thus appealed to a broad audience and challenges both Mulvey and de Lauretis' theories. Using Craig Owens' reading of Medusa, I have argued that Madonna uses these past feminine film tropes to construct her appearance and to play with stereotypes. In doing so, she reveals that femininity is a performance which can be adopted when needed. Madonna's engagement with these existing tropes, which she takes to the extreme, shows that she is not simply a product of male anxiety but is a woman who is in control of her own narrative and plays with these monstrous tropes for her own advantage and to widen her appeal to a broader audience. By rewriting the films she was inspired by in her music videos, Madonna highlights how the dynamics of cinema work and by playing with the dynamics of the gaze, she subverts power dynamics. For Madonna, this need to be a spectacle and to ensure the gaze of her audience was on her was necessary to

remain in the spotlight as a successful female performer in the first decade of her career; and one that began with a period of change with the launch of *MTV*. This chapter thus reveals Madonna's awareness of how to survive and build a career in an industry that was (and is) dominated by men.

This notion of using the monstrous-feminine as a method of empowerment as a woman in the entertainment business continues in my analysis of Lady Gaga. To explore Gaga's use of the monstrous, I used two main themes from Medusa's mythology: the female genitals and motherhood. I argued that Gaga's use of the monstrous shared striking similarities with Medusa's own tale, but with one very significant difference. Gaga, unlike Medusa, willingly became a monster; *she transformed herself*. Under these two themes, I proposed that Gaga is drawn to the monstrous-feminine in horror films. In the first of these two chapters on Lady Gaga, I analysed and compared Medusa and Gaga as rape victims, arguing that Gaga's initial use of the monster in her 'Bad Romance' music video presents her as a castrating female monster. In this video, Gaga castrates and burns the body of a member of the Russian Mafia who symbolises the music business. Gaga has been the victim of male violence within the industry, and I read her use of the monster as a way of playing to male fears to subvert power dynamics. Gaga's use of the monster extends beyond the horror film, and in this chapter, I continue to engage with fairy tale narratives. Gaga plays with myths (such as that of Apollo and Daphne) and fairy tales (*Little Red Riding Hood*) that place onus on women for their assault, and she subverts them. In Gaga's version of *Little Red Riding Hood*, for example, *she* becomes the wolf (another manifestation of the vagina dentata). As Gaga willingly becomes the monster, she takes control of the narrative, giving herself agency and control over her body, while injecting the tale with feminine animal-like desire. Through her subversion of various tales of rape and monstrosity, Gaga gives women a voice. Similarly, in the second chapter on Gaga, as Mother Monster, Gaga challenges the way women have been portrayed as monsters by patriarchal society that aligns the female body with shame and disgust. By bringing the abject to the fore, Gaga plays with images of disgust and the monstrous-feminine to her advantage and changes the very definition of the 'monster'.

An important theme throughout this thesis is also the *mirror*. In the Medusa myth, it is through the eyes of Perseus (who is the only man able to have looked safely at Medusa through the shield provided by Athena/Minerva) that a description of the Gorgon is given. Hélène Cixous argued that this mirror was distortive, and reminiscent of how men have

repeatedly created distorted reflections of women in myths, fairy tales, literature, and films, that show women as monstrous creatures. The theme of the mirror points to how these women are creating their own mirror reflections that show their complex female identities, but also reveals that these women, in diversifying what is shown onscreen, are appealing to a broad range of spectators who, in these pop stars, see aspects of themselves onscreen and can identify with these women. I also argue that these pop stars are aware of this and, as agents over their image, consciously manipulate their appearance to appeal to a diverse demographic.

Fixating the Gaze

Each pop star thus orchestrates how they are looked at by giving certain readings via their image that attract the gaze of a diverse audience. Rihanna and Azealia Banks, for example, use their images to offer different readings to that are more likely to be picked up on by their Black female spectators. In the case of Rihanna, as a 'sexy' Gorgon on a men's magazine, she primarily appeals to a straight male audience, but she is also playing with the gaze. She highlights that even images that seem to be targeted toward a specific audience can still be subversive and have a much wider appeal and purpose. To her Black female fans, I argue that she offers an image of identification, for Medusa has become a collective symbol of the Black female experience, unity, and pride. In Azealia Banks' case, I have argued that her use of Medusa points to how Black women have been denied the gaze, because they have been denied access to themselves, for they do not see positive images of Black women reflected to them in society. This can lead to the 'oppositional gaze', where Black female spectators critique depictions of characters onscreen. It is through this critical gaze, that I argue has led Banks to create her own narratives that combine mythical and fairy tale imagery with her own Black female experiences. It is arguably for this reason, that one fan on *Twitter* argued that Banks' mermaid persona was directly responsible for Disney's decision to cast a Black Ariel in the upcoming live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid*.

Rihanna and Azealia Banks reveal their complex Black female identities and can be used in conjunction with Medusa to explore how race and gender affect the way in which images are created and received. Similarly, Madonna uses the monstrous-feminine to appeal to a wide audience that extends well beyond a male and female spectator binary. Madonna's performances should not be viewed as acts of repetition, but subversive parody. By revealing that gender is a construction, Madonna opens herself up to be decoded by her viewers. She

speaks to straight male desires, but also desires based on class mobility and women's quest for economic stability, as well as to her queer audience. Rather than just using shock tactics to fixate the gaze of her audience, it empowers both Madonna *and* her fans because her fans feel seen. Therefore, Madonna consciously attracts the gaze of her audience, but unlike in Brown's reading, she is not simply stunning her audience as if they had just looked at the Gorgon, rather she encourages her audience to decode her image, to engage with her, and thus I read her, as well as the rest of the women in this thesis, as *semi-Medusas*.

Pop stars are thus opening themselves up to be identified with by their diverse audience as part of a reciprocal relationship. This is particularly evident in Lady Gaga's re-writing of the monster, where she presents the monster as a positive figure that appeals to the gaze of the spectator. The monster has repeatedly embodied fears of the 'Other', but as Gaga turns the monster into a powerful symbol, those who feel 'Other' or vulnerable in society have a figure of identification.²³² This is particularly evident for her LGBT+ fans, and Gaga, by reclaiming the monster (which can be read as queer) and bringing it into the mainstream in a positive light, creates a figure that appeals to her queer following. Thus, Lady Gaga invites fans to identify with her, and both pop star and fan share a monstrous identity as 'Mother Monster' and 'Little Monster' respectively. To further explore how Gaga seduces the gaze of her audience by using monstrous imagery, I used Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection that has since been adopted by Barbara Creed as part of her horror film theory. I argued that Gaga as an abject monster, who displays images that evoke disgust, appeals to the spectator's desire for a union with the pre-Oedipal mother. For this reason, I proposed that Gaga adopts the monstrous to empower herself, but also to draw her fans into a unique fan/pop star identification, that leads fans to view her as a maternal figure that they use as a mirror reflection to base their own identity.

As explored through a Medusa lens, the women in this thesis are all engaging and interrogating existing narratives of monstrous women to create their *own*. While I have begun this thesis by analysing women who have become the Gorgon, I have also shown how Medusa can be used as a lens through which to read how female pop stars have agency over their image and work, and the relationship with their audience. This thesis thus does not give a feminist reading of Medusa's ancient myth but presents a way that Medusa can be used to

²³² It is as this powerful and protective Monster why I suggest fans have read Gaga as Medusa, thus, in turn, revealing that these modern audiences view the Gorgon as an empowering monster, without the negative connotations.

provide a theoretical framework through which to read images of women in an empowering light. Using a Medusa lens, it can be shown how these female pop stars are actively attracting the gaze of their audience by subverting the monstrous-feminine to reveal their complex identities while appealing to the queer desires of their audience. By ‘speaking’ to the various desires in the audience, it shows that spectators like to feel ‘seen’ onscreen, and I think these pop stars are realising this and playing to it to empower, but also to appeal to, a larger demographic and ensure their own success as female pop stars. As a final note, although this thesis has attempted to cover various queer identities, that include race, class, gender, and sexuality, there is scope for further research. It would be interesting to explore how people with other gendered identities or those with disabilities engage with Medusa, or by extension other narratives and monsters from the ancient world. By returning to myths, and indeed other forms of storytelling, we can challenge the way in which they have been used in modernity, as well as create our own, so that everyone can feel seen and find their reflection. Essentially, these stories are not ‘fixed’, thus, by ‘popping’ Medusa, the Gorgon can be re-read and moulded by, and for, modern audiences.

Appendix

There are numerous pieces of fan art that depict Lady Gaga as Medusa, and which have not been discussed in this thesis. This is because of the volume, but also because there is very little information that goes alongside these images. The artwork is often shared on various sites and without crediting the artist. I include these images below to show the breadth of primary sources on Medusa.



Figure 1. This image, captioned *Lady Gaga Medusa: Sarah Guajardo*, was created and uploaded to the site *Pinterest* by Sarah Guajardo (date unknown). She has created several artworks of Lady Gaga as well as other pop stars such as Madonna, but Gaga is the only one depicted as Medusa. The snakes and pose here are a direct copy of Rihanna's Medusa on the front of *GQ*.



Figure 2. Found on *Pinterest*, user Ashley Medusa says, 'Not a Lady Gaga fan, but definitely diggin this'. It is unclear who the fan is that produced the image or the date of its creation.



Figure 3. After a number of supposed leaks of unreleased tracks from the album *Artpop*, some fans erroneously claimed that Gaga had a song called ‘Medusa’. This likely explains why this image was created by a fan to form the background of an audio clip uploaded by user A R T P O P to *Youtube* called ‘RedOne’s LG6 Instrumental Leak [Snippet]’ (2018). Again, this is a false claim of unreleased music by Gaga. That Gaga was said to have an unreleased track called ‘Medusa’ does explain why there is this connection between portraying the pop star as the Gorgon in relation to *Artpop*. However, knowledge of ‘Medusa’ is not widely known, and I argue that the images of Gaga as Medusa in relation to this album can be read against several factors, such as the use of ancient myth within the album and its promotion, sexual violence, and Gaga’s use of the monstrous. This is exemplified in chapter three and figure four below.



Figure 4. This is an image taken during Gaga’s ‘Artpop’ era of her wearing white dreadlocks which she had debuted in December 2013. This image was found on the board ‘Medusa’ created by user Amart on *Pinterest* (date unknown). There are various images of ‘Ovid’s Medusa’ on this board, but Lady Gaga is the only one to be read as Medusa, rather than being an image of the Gorgon. Alongside this photograph the user states, ‘Lady GaGa is another modern person who we can compare to Medusa, as she is known for her scary outfits but is beautiful despite her appearance’ (Amart n.d.). It clearly shows one fan’s perspective of why Gaga is so often connected with Medusa.



Figure 5. With the snakes of Caravaggio’s *Medusa* (1597) forming the background, the snake hair taken from Bernini’s *Medusa* (1630), and her head imposed in front of *Versace’s* Medusa symbol, this is Lady Gaga created to look like a Medusa sculpture. The original artist is unknown, and this image was shared by aaron_s on the website favim.com. It is suggested that the original image was taken from the *Tumblr* account ‘Decay of the Superstar’ where several images and memes of Gaga are posted. The image is tagged ‘Artpop’ and the segmented background that bears renaissance artwork inspired by classical myth certainly evokes the *Artpop* album cover (see chapter three).



Figure 6. This image is very similar to figure five (above). Gaga is again shown as a Medusa sculpture, with the hair of Bernini's *Medusa* imposed on her head. The artist is unknown, but the image is shared by Diana [@MarilynJudySylvia] (2013) on the site weheartit.com. The image shows Gaga's 'Artpop' tattoo, and she wears the mask that she frequently wore while promoting the album. The tag 'Artpop' also suggests that the record was the inspiration behind showing Gaga as Medusa. Diana labels this image 'The Decay Of The Superstar | via Tumblr' suggesting that the image is taken from the same *Tumblr* account as figure five.



Figure 7. A t-shirt with *Versace's* Medusa but with the make-up Gaga wore for 'Applause', a single taken from *Artpop*. Found on fashion website *Where to get*, the creator of this top is unknown, for this item cannot be found on the official *Versace* website.



Figure 8. Removed from its original location, this black and white image was uploaded to *Pinterest* where user Linda Stone saved it to her board 'GooGoo for Gaga'. The artist and date are unknown.



Figure 9. This piece is called *Gaga Medusa* and was created by *Deviant Art* user *blood-violin*. It was uploaded in 2010 and is a photograph of a pencil sketch of Gaga as the Gorgon.



Figure 10. This illustration is called *Lady Gaga Condessa Medusa* and is inspired by Gaga's role in the television show *American Horror Story* (2011-present) where she played the vampiric, *The Countess*. The image has been created by *Candy Art*, a graphic designer from Brazil (2018). He has interpreted both Gaga and *The Countess* as a Medusa figure yet, in the television series, no such link is made. *The Countess* does, however, wear a silver snake bracelet.



Figure 11. Found on *Choice News'* Facebook page (9th of February 2020), the user claims this is a promotional piece for an upcoming film where Gaga stars as Medusa (stating that it will be released by Sony in 2022). There is no evidence of such a film, suggesting that this has been made by a fan.



Figure 12. I was unable to find any information on this image. Found on Google Images, there is no direct link to the site where the original image could be found. The image shows Gaga as the Gorgon, and the green eyes suggest that some inspiration has been taken from Ray Harryhausen's Medusa in *Clash of the Titans* (1981).

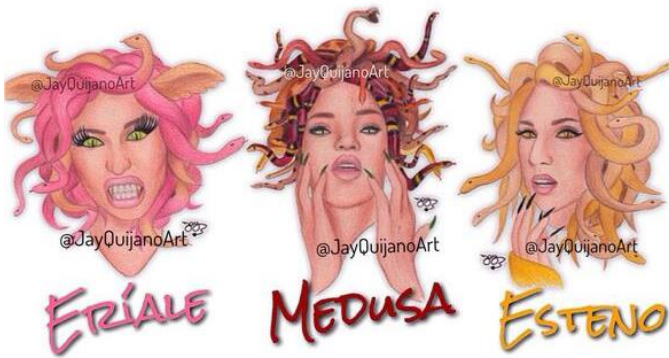


Figure 13. Created by Jay Quijano Art [[@JayQuijanoArt](#)] and uploaded on to *Twitter*, this image titled 'Gorgons Sisters' (2014) shows rapper Nicki Minaj and Lady Gaga as the sisters to Rihanna's Medusa (clearly inspired by Rihanna's *GQ* cover shoot in 2013).

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