

**Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire**

**Faculty of Creative Technologies**

**DESIRE AND THE MONSTER:**

**Female Sexuality and Forbidden Attraction in Horror Cinema**

**by**

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## **DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfillment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Film and Television Production. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. Prot.', written over a horizontal line.

Date: 07/03/2026

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## INTRODUCTION: THE MONSTEROUS FEMININE

Horror films often allow us to depict our most complex, confusing, and repressed desires. It is a genre that allows chaos to reign, emotions to be explored through monsters and allows a commentary on society. Female desire in horror films is often shown as excessive and dangerous. It seems complex and often contradicts what traditional pleasure is. Horror treats female desire as a threat that is repeatedly punished or ends in chaos or death. This has been seen in horror films early as cinema has existed and present in modern day. Women are often the sexually focused ones in these kinds of films. It is often the female character that engages with the monster in an understanding or sexual way rather than a male character. This is not a coincidence; there is a reason for this for what this represents for feminine desire and for the audience. In some films, this exploration of desire goes deeper than physical bodies but rather social influence on women and psychological inner conflicts. This thesis is going to examine Andrzej Zulawski's *Possession* (1981) and Robert Egger's *Nosferatu* (2024), of how these films portray female desire for their narrative, social setting and inner conflicts.

Chapter 1 is about female sexuality and the monster. By using outside sources such as Sigmund Freud's text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) to dissect the psychology of desire that can be applied to the lead female characters. This text will help understand why people do what they do in traumatic and painful situations and what makes them want to run away from the pain. By looking at the classic fairytale of *Beauty and the Beast* which is intended for children as early as 1740 we can further investigate the horror film genre where sexuality and desire are more complex. In Margrit Shildrick's book *Embodying the Monster - Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* we unravel what the monster means in these stories, what they say about men and women, society and desire.

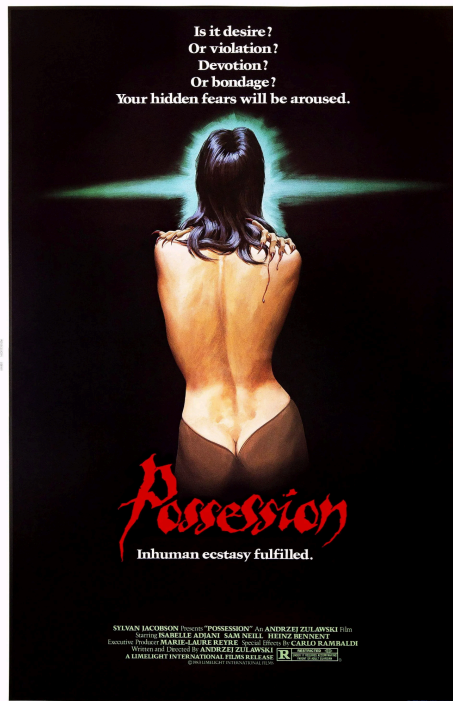


Figure 1. *Possession* (1981) Poster

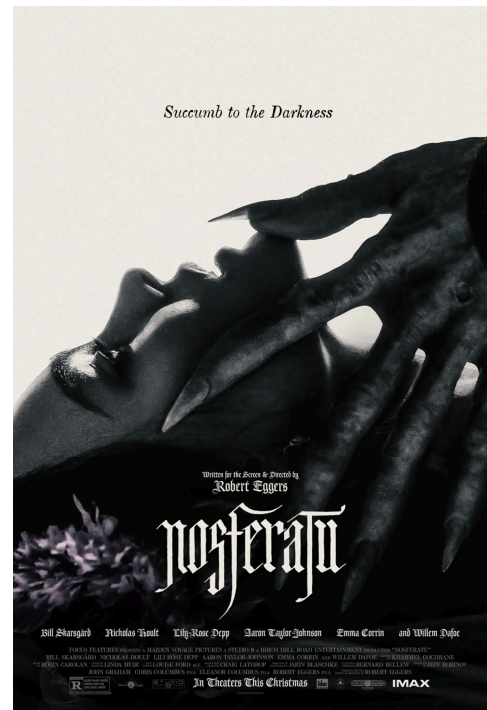


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This thesis will analyse *Possession* in Chapter 2 and *Nosferatu* in Chapter 3, visually, subjectively, and comparatively. This kind of bond between a monster and a woman explores the themes of forbidden love, empathy and what female desire is. Both films deeply focus on their female characters; the complexity of what marriage is and how a monster seduces them. Both female characters in these films show signs of inner conflicts that are exploding outwards and die tragically in the arms of a companion. Both posters depict women in vulnerable and sexual matters. By being over 40 years apart from their release date, both set in different time periods from each other and different cinematic styles, they still explore the darkness of female desire. By doing so, we will also see what film techniques and choices contribute to the themes.

## CHAPTER 1: FEMALE SEXUALITY AND THE MONSTER

This chapter will investigate Freud's theories to understand how pleasure works within us, the reason for stories that involve a woman-monster relationship such as *Beauty and the Beast* and unpack what the monster visually and metaphorically stands for. This

section will give a background necessary for later analysing both *Possession* and *Nosferatu*.

Sigmund Freud is known as the father of psychoanalysis and one of the most influential intellectual figures of the twentieth century. His work and theories helped us understand childhood, memory, personalities, and sexuality. His essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* which was written in 1920. It is a psychoanalytic text that challenges the assumption that human desire is solely driven by the desire to pursue pleasure and avoid emotional pain. This text challenges how desire is displayed in the films and repeatedly aligns with danger, loss, and dissolution rather than fulfilment. The concept Freud discusses is that the organism or the person, whether it's biological or physiological, seeks to minimise things that are unpleasant and painful while to maximise all things pleasurable. The problem with this is that many people would disagree and believe they are the majority in control of their actions and impulses. But in horror films where stories tend to be exaggerated and far from everyday life, it isn't too hard to grasp this concept by Freud. If anything, it helps us understand the females in these horror films. Films in general are a fiction of real life, so it begs the question that perhaps Freud wasn't completely wrong. Freud observes that people repeatedly engage in behaviors that cause suffering, trauma, and destruction, even when pleasure is clearly not the outcome. This leads him to propose a darker, more disturbing theory of human desire that alongside the drive toward pleasure and life, there exists a drive toward repetition, destruction, and death.<sup>1</sup> Freud's concept of the death drive is particularly relevant to horror cinema, where attraction to danger often reflects a deeper psychological impulse toward destruction, transgression, and forbidden desire.

If we look at a story with a pleasurable ending such as *Beauty and the Beast*, it shows that humankind has been telling love stories between a human and a monster for centuries. A forbidden and otherworldly romance. The common experience of human society inspires narrative solutions that resemble one another even when there can be no contact or exchange. This is evident in the similarities of the classic fairytales with their origins. This shows us that the themes we have been touching upon in our stories are still relevant and retold in different mediums including films. *Beauty and the Beast* originated from France by Gabrielle Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve in 1740.<sup>2</sup> It emerged during the French enlightenment period, a movement that emphasized individualism, proper femininity and marriage as a social duty. Fairytales would be used as a didactic

tool particularly aimed at young women and girls. The universal story at its core follows a young woman (The Beauty) who sacrifices her freedom to save her father against a Beast. She is imprisoned by the Beast who is dangerous but secretly desires her. He never harms her while she stays with him. Over time, Beauty learns to see past the beast's physical appearance and gets to know the true him. With her love for him, he transforms back into a handsome man.

The story has been retold many times, all over the world and in many different genres. It makes female sexual awakening appear safe and redemptive. Beauty has a separate desire from 'normal' men which makes her have the control of who she chooses as her lover. However, the happy ending doesn't suit the bold horror genre as in *Possession* desire destroys rather than redeems and in *Nosferatu* desire is fatal rather than moral. The story of Beauty and the Beast is a vague blueprint of these films, a means to help understand the complexity of desire and feminine sexuality.<sup>3</sup> An interesting observation made by Marina Warner in her book *From the beast to the blonde* about the Disney film 'Beauty and the Beast' which was a tremendous hit however after the reveal of the Beast's true self wasn't as successful as Disney hoped for. Marina Warner states, "No child in my experience preferred the sparkling candy-coloured human who emerged from the enchanted monster; the Beast has won them"<sup>2</sup> Could be argued that the prince image was boring and passive compared to the emotionally complex and relatable character of the beast. This is a glimpse into the complexities of what makes *Nosferatu* the vampire and the monster *Possession* frightening yet very desirable by the female leads.(pg 300-318)

To understand this sexual desire fascination, it is important to look at the monster part and what it means, represents and shows about female and male sexuality. The term 'monster' or 'monstrous' has been used to describe something negative, awful, and unattractive. This concept has been used throughout western history from its earliest records. From myths, folklore to literature, art, and films. Something to be described as a 'monster' or 'monstrous' is unacceptable to society, something unusual or even other-worldly in some contexts. However, there has always been a fascination with the 'strange' and 'different'. If we look at freak shows as an example from the early 19th century that would showcase exotic or deformed animals and even humans were known also as 'human curiosities. These individuals fell under what society saw as the failures to the normative standard: people with different ethnic features or people with rare conditions such as dwarfism, gigantism, conjoined twins and self-made individuals such

as heavily tattooed individuals and extreme performers. These shows prove the public's fascination with unique and extraordinary bodies. There was mystery surrounding these individuals and show people lured crowds with tricks to see the show and make money.<sup>4</sup>

In Margrit Shildrick's book 'Embodying the Monster' she examines the concept of the 'monstrous body' in relation to the feminine body. Something that is both familiar and threatening at the same time. Historically female bodies have been associated with blood, fluids, reproduction, aging and sexuality. These things all change, grow, leak, and decay. In western culture it is preferred that female bodies are controlled, neat and closed. Thus, the female body becomes 'monstrous' not because it is evil but because it won't stay fixed or neat. It can be suggested that the intimate relationships between a monster and a human woman is a form for the woman to finally be with something that she can relate to. Not a human man but a misunderstood and vulnerable monster. She understands the unwanted attention by the male audience which wants nothing but to destroy the monster as it's a threat. This just raises her desire to save the monster or to engage with it.

If we look at the mother's aspect in all this, a mother is the source of life; she is caring and physically intimate and emotionally overwhelming but also no longer individual as she has a child and a threat to autonomy. Every man has a mother, and she is usually the first bond a man will have once he is born. If a monster is categorized as a male, it still only knows that motherly care is the safety connection. A man can be vulnerable and intimate with a woman but not show this vulnerability to the rest of society. This is why for years it's been ideal for the male dominated society to control women to maintain the harsh masculinity which is deemed as the best masculinity but not necessarily the best. Could be argued that this desire a woman has for the monster is a rejection for the controlling masculine man that threatens her physically, sexually and mentally. She would rather be with a vulnerable monster that is also looked down upon in society, and this can lead to an intimate level between two beings of the common grounds they share.<sup>5</sup>

Shildrick highlights that the monster exists because we have an idea of what 'normal' is. The monster is created to protect the 'normal' but it resembles us in some way. This

is why monsters in the media are often sexual, intimate, and emotional. They reflect the inner part of our bodies, not external. For a human man, throughout history, he is bound by marriage, family, religion and patriarchy. However, if he allows his own inner desires to be fulfilled, it can lead to adultery, moral failure, and betrayal. Even a male dominated society has rules for a man. For a monster however, he isn't bound to society's rules, is not accountable and not 'husband material'. If we look at *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, he doesn't follow the usual stereotypical masculinity rules.<sup>5</sup>

He's a foreign, charismatic disruptor who preys on women and shakes up the men who cannot die can kill. In the book, Johnathan Harker finds himself trapped in Dracula's castle and is turned into the object of desire. Overwhelmed by a wicked, burning desire. He's suddenly playing the role Victorian society reserved for women: helpless, vulnerable, and unsure whether he should be enjoying this. This captures Dracula as the one with the most powerful, even against a human man. Going back to Shildrick's point, a man will fear what he most desires and that is sometimes power, which the monster will have over the man.<sup>5</sup> Traditionally speaking, a woman will be drawn to the one most powerful as he or 'it' can protect her best. The monster serves as a metaphor for female desires within a man and the inner desires of a man. All these points are to be considered when trying to understand the desire in *Possession* and *Nosferatu*.

As for the horror genre where monsters are most common, they work on many levels to portray the unspeakable. Our nervous system reacts to strong emotions like fear and pleasure in similar ways; it doesn't always differentiate between the two. From a scientific perspective, when we are scared our adrenaline and cortisol levels go up and our blood goes to our extremities. All this also happens when we are aroused. When horror films are watched, our bodies go into alert mode. For some people, their heart rate increases, sweating starts and respiration becomes uneven. If you are watching a horror film with another person, in particular someone you are attracted to, these hormones mix and ask you questions if it's arousal or fear. This can explain why sex and nudity are present in many horror films and why people seem more drawn to horror films. This helps us understand the horror genre before unpacking where desire for the characters lies.<sup>6</sup>

## CHAPTER 2: POSSESSION

Once you have watched *Possession* (1981), it stays with you forever, for better or for worse. *Possession* is a rollercoaster of intense emotions, striking and violent visuals, unforgettably brutal performances and has been leaving its viewers stunned till this day. Directed by Andrzej Zulawski in 1981 and filmed in West Berlin, Germany.<sup>7</sup> Starring Isabelle Adjani as *Anna* and Sam Neil as *Mark* portray a couple's marriage breakdown into complete chaos. Both characters undergo psychological breakdowns in bizarre or violent ways. The most famous and talked about scene in this film is the underground subway scene where Isabelle Adjani's character is alone and executes erratic hysteria. It delves into a lot of themes and metaphors, in particular the unnamed tentacle monster. Controversies have followed this film for years due to its graphic and disturbing content, which led to censorship in multiple countries upon its release. This film has a lot to unpack from a filmmaker's point of view from its style and meaning. Regardless of what individuals think of *Possession*, it has now become a cult classic in the film industry.



**Figure 3.** Isabelle Adjani in *Possession* (1981) subway scene

To understand what *Possession* is about we turn to the director Andrzej Zulawski, whose visions are influenced by his experiences in wartime and communist Poland. He was born in 1940 in Ukraine under the USSR rule, Poland at the time. He was unable to work in Poland due to the political repression, and his previous film was shut down in the final stages of production. All elements of it, including the sets, were destroyed by authorities. At the same time, his marriage to Malgorzata Braunek fell apart. “In the

first part of the film, most of the scenes between the man and the woman, and even the dialogue, are directly from my life.” Zulawski went to New York and contemplated suicide. However, Andy Warhol talked him out of it and within ten days he wrote the screenplay for *Possession*. He went to West Berlin, to film his fourth feature film *Possession* during the cold war.<sup>8</sup> Co-produced with France and Germany, it was decided to be in the English language to reach a wider audience. Berlin was chosen for the story as it was the city of divided hearts and people. “Surrounded by the wall, to have this entrenched psychology of people surrounded by evil” he stated. This element grounds the story in real life and history.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 4.** Berlin wall on the right in *Possession* (1981)

The plot of what actually happens can be a little confusing. Once the film begins, we are introduced to Mark, who is a spy returning home to West Berlin after a long assignment to discover that his wife, Anna, wants a divorce with no explanation and is showing odd behavior. At first, he assumes that she is having an affair. Her behavior becomes increasingly erratic, swinging between hysteria, secrecy, and periods of unexplained disappearances. Their verbal arguments escalate to physical violence. Mark tries to hold the family together for the sake of their young son, Bob. Zulawski states in a commentary that Sam Neil “is the glue holding the film together”.<sup>9</sup> Mark soon discovers that she has been seeing a man named Heinrich who lives with his mother, but even Heinrich admits he also no longer understands Anna’s increasingly concerning behavior. Mark manages to follow her to an old empty apartment where he discovers a blood stained mattress, rotting food and signs that she is hiding something. In the

meantime, Bob's school teacher Helen, who is also played by Isabelle Adjani with green contact lenses.<sup>10</sup>

Mark reacts to this, but Helen behaves completely indifferently. She becomes a calm and supportive presence in Mark's life and he sleeps with her. Back in the hidden apartment, Anna cares for a mysterious, evolving creature with green eyes that she appears to be nurturing as if it were her partner. Mark revisits Heinrich and ends up drowning him in a toilet seat. Anna also begins committing violent acts, killing people who discover her secret and fleeing across the city. The situation keeps escalating as multiple deaths occur. Mark blows up a car and steals a motorcycle. The creature becomes a human-like doppelganger of Sam Neil's character. The real Anna and Mark get shot by the police and die at the top of a spiral staircase. Bleeding and dying, they share a final kiss. Mark's double escapes. The last thing we see before the film ends is Bob in Helen's apartment when the doorbell rings. She presumes it's Mark and goes to the door. Bob repeats "don't open" before running to the bathroom to drown himself. Outside, war planes fly and illuminate the apartment.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 5.** Anna's and Mark's final kiss in *Possession* (1981)

The film can be interpreted in many ways as each scene carries a subtext and touches its many themes. It's an experience to feel rather than fully understood. As a result, this can either infuriate viewers or keep them hooked in analyzing the film. The key themes the film touches on are marriage, love and violence, obsession, and psychological breakdown. The setting also touches on political anxieties which mirror Anna and Mark, North and South of Berlin and the wall separating them.

Zulawski takes elements from his own failed marriage, which is the core theme of the film, and we see both Anna and Mark process the separation in very different and bizarre ways. On a practical level, Mark and Anna fight, they make up, they break things, they cry, and they neglect Bob because of their constant conflict. The idea begins as we meet Helen, Bob's teacher. This shows how Mark is seeing his wife in other people, literally. He asks Bob, "Whose more beautiful, Helen or Mama?" to justify why he picks Helen to have an affair with.<sup>10</sup> She looks like the perfect version of his wife: she cares for Bob and is stable mentally. We as a viewer also must question if Helen is real or is Mark projecting his needs and desires onto her? This is a strong indication of toxic relationships and how partners get stuck in a perpetual cycle and the suffering is endless.<sup>11</sup>

For Anna, it is more complex as she is the first one initiating the separation, exhibits worrying behavior first and also first to have an affair. She seeks something to give her pleasure she craves, to fulfill her inner desires and being understood as her mental wellbeing deteriorates. The answer is a slimy, tentacled monster covered in blood. Over the course of the film, the monster becomes increasingly human and finally takes the form of her husband Mark. At the end, both partners still want each other, they see themselves in other people or creatures, but self-destruction is too deep and they end up dying and sharing a bloody kiss. By the end of the film, the abstract completely overtakes the realistic, however Bob's neglect results in him drowning himself in the bathtub, the child of the marriage that has just destroyed itself, also dies. The film captures the complexity, the trauma, and the emotions of a deteriorating toxic marriage and its phases in abstract visuals and performances.<sup>12</sup>

Some elements of *Possession* are shared with the female lead in *Beauty and the Beast*. A human man represents real social power, physical and legal dominance and risk of pregnancy. However, the 'creature' and the 'beast' exist outside of society and are already 'damned' and can be desired without implicating real men. Both *Beauty* and *Anna* can unleash and explore their own sexualities and desires with these 'monsters' which would be frowned upon by society. Both the 'Beast' and the 'Creature' undergo a transformation in both storylines which is caused by the love and intimacy of both

lead females. The Beast becomes a handsome prince, and the creature becomes the ideal version of Mark with green eyes. This shows and proves the deeper symbolism of these monsters. The desire never stays monstrous; if nurtured, it can become ‘beautiful’ or more acceptable to society.

Obsession drives every character’s action, the film’s pacing and structure. Mark becomes obsessed with uncovering Anna’s secret, following her in Berlin as a detective. This obsession leads to neglect of his own wellbeing, maintaining the apartment and even their son Bob. Bob is left in the messy apartment for days, eating sweets or whatever he can find. It shows the human condition of obsession leading to serious consequences. Mark and Anna seem to despise, hurt yet obsess about each other throughout the film. They cannot outrun their marriage. This goes back to the title of the film. It is as if they are possessed by each other and their own demons and dark desires. “And I’m dying to know if it’s killing you like it’s killing me?” The cycle eventually collapses on themselves.



**Figure 6.** Anna making love with the creature in *Possession* (1981)

“Every marriage is about bodies, isn’t it? If you touch the body of someone you love... it tells you something about what’s going on, about where the person is, about whether she’s going to go or stay.” Zulawski stated.<sup>9</sup> We never see Mark and Anna truly embrace each other; their past is briefly mentioned. In the film, all we see is Anna being intimate and nourishing the monster in the apartment. Body horror is used in the horror genre

widely, in erotic and disturbing ways. The love making scene is disturbing to watch but it shows us the nature of Anna's character into her complex mind.

Going back to Margrit Shildrick's book where she discusses how the 'clean and proper' body is a cultural idea and not the biological truth. Real bodies bleed, have sex, age, decay etc. It is the female body that challenges the ideal vision of the 'body'. This scene shows all these elements in the way the monster appears, and Anna is intimate with it. The monsters in this film manage to protect the human body as in comparison, the female body that ages, bleeds and gives birth is nothing like the monstrous one. The monster is the scene that exposes lies, breaks the taboo of bodies and desires.<sup>5</sup>

Both of the film's central characters appear deeply disturbed and unlikeable, caught up in the agony of codependence. Mark is an emotionally abusive, immature, and obsessively controlling man, whose occupation as a Cold War spy of some sort only feeds his suspicious nature. Zulawski states that "Sam Neill is the glue holding the film together. Isabelle Adjani comes and goes and appears and disappears and makes a big bang every time she appears, but Sam had to be there all the time and hold the pieces together, by being there all the time."<sup>9</sup>

His wife, Anna, so existentially or mentally unwell that Adjani's performance of Anna's hysterics transcends mere psychopathology and transforms, quite materially. Anna is wracked by spasms of desire, desperation, and guilt. She is emotional and sometimes literally aphasic with dread and loathing. Isabelle Adjani stated in an interview in relation to her role in *Possession* "I could never accept again". She goes to talk about how exhausting it was and how she "survived" the filming. "It's not a job that facilitates a happy frame of mind, quite the opposite. That's why it's important to be surrounded by friends who can be angels... Otherwise, you can lose yourself."<sup>13</sup> Her co-star Sam Neil shared in his memoir that he feels the film could not be made today. "Zulawski asked more of you than you could possibly give. There were times when he would scream, bellow at Adjani right in her face. It was distressing to see" This reality of what the cast had to witness and experience acting in such a distressing film is hard to imagine in the nowadays film industry.

Heinrick represents, at least to Anna, an ideal or perfect lover. He seems to be more patient and accepting Anna as well as fulfilling her sexually and not seeking to control her. From his apartment, it seems to be wealthier. This is all the complete opposite of Mark in the film. Mark confronts him, and Heinrick also tells Mark that he isn't aware where Anna goes for long periods of time. Bob is the collateral damage of Anna and Mark, who are forgotten, neglected and innocent. Bob symbolises emergency as he mimics sirens and plays rescue in the bathtub at some points throughout the film. This is foreshadowing the ending where military explosions and sirens are heard and illuminate the door, he begs Helen not to open. He is also seen playing with emergency toy soldiers at the end. In a religious perspective, his bathtub drowning scene can be compared to baptism, to wash away sins and be saved by God from the unholy creatures created because of his dead parents.

Special effects artist Carlo Rambaldi, who also worked on *Alien* (1979) and *E.T.* (1982) was called to complete *Possession's* "creature". However, Zulawski was critical of the design as he intended the creature to be a sexual symbol. It oozes blood and milk and has both male and female characteristics. The creature compels her to do its murderous bidding at whatever cost. To further connect her to it, the subway scene of her breakdown ends with her on the ground with blood and milk oozing out of her. This has been speculated as a portrayal of a miscarriage.<sup>14</sup>

Religion and references to God are also scattered throughout the film, alongside a scene where Anna prays looking up to a crucified Jesus statue before the miscarriage scene. She explains this to Mark later as it was a miscarriage of "Sister Faith". "And what was left," she says, "is Sister Chance". Anna has rejected God as a source of meaning, and she turns to other methods, her new lack of faith apparently allowing her the moral freedom to carry out her gruesome work.



**Figure 7.** Isabelle Adjani and Sam Neill with Bruno Nuytten in *Possession* (1980)

The film's cinematographer was Bruno Nuytten, a French cinematographer on 35 millimeter in aspect ratio 1.66. From July 7, 1980, to August 31, 1980.<sup>7</sup> Zulawski and Nuytten were in total alignment with the idea that the camera should tell the bulk of the story. Together, they carefully manifested that idea through camera motion, blocking with the actors, choreography, and set design. Nuytten and actress Adjani were in a romantic relationship at the time of filming, which can be stated that raw intimacy and vulnerability was captured on film. The film consists of a lot of single shot frames or long handheld scenes, reverse shots, tracking shots, and close ups of intense facial expressions. The camera movements play a vital role in elevating the emotions of each scene. There are many scenes where the camera circles the action, at different speeds. This sense that their world is spinning and chaotic is achieved. During a violent argument, we spin around Anna and Mark in the small apartment. The jittery editing and shaky camera also give a sense of realism of the action. The ending revisits the theme of spinning out of control, as the couple run up the spiral staircase to be shot dead. This scene can symbolise the stairway to heaven or Hell in relation to religious imagery.

Blocking and frame composition in the scenes tells us more about the characters than their words. The Cafe Einstein, where they meet in public for the first time in the film which gives logic and order to their dysfunctional relationship, however, the cycle repeats itself as they literally and metaphorically cannot see eye to eye. Often Anna and Mark are always situated on opposite sides of the frame, distant and facing away from each other.<sup>15</sup> The meeting ends in chairs being violently pushed and screaming. (6) The apartment it was filmed in was a 34-square-meter apartment which gave a

claustrophobic atmosphere which was intended. Zulawski commented on this choice of filming location “This is exactly the state of mind the couple are in, locked and moving about in this cage, all the time.”<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 8.** Cafe in *Possession* (1981)



**Figure 9.** Apartment in *Possession* (1981)

The film’s colour palette is bleak relying on cold blues, pale whites and greys. This gives the film a sense of isolation and dread, much like the colour of Berlin during the cold war. As stated previously, Berlin being the setting elevated the eerie tone and landscape of the film. Creating an atmosphere of division, paranoia, and dread. Zulawski draws attention to elements such as the city by clearing it of people, public squares, the metro platform, streets, and cafes. This does not reflect reality where there would be people around normally. This is a continuous choice by the director and exhibited effectively.

The careful casting here is absolutely brilliant. Adjani at the time had been blacklisted in her native France, bearing the brunt of an unfair reputation for being “difficult and a hysteric” on set. Sam Neill was a relatively unknown young actor hailing from New Zealand, having only acted in two films prior. Heinz Bennett wonderfully cast as the hilarious Heinrich was a trained thespian of the prestigious Schiller Theater in Germany. The intentional theatricality of the acting stems from the “Theater of the Absurd” and “Pinteresque” concepts.<sup>9</sup>

Upon release, *Possession* was somewhat of a failure at the box office. It opened at the most prestigious arts festival in the world, Le Festival de Cannes, in 1982, securing a

Best Actress award for Isabelle Adjani, and appeared in Competition for the Palme d'Or grand prize. Upon theatrical release elsewhere though, it became one of the original 72 genre flicks on the conservative British censors' list of "Video Nasties".<sup>7</sup> This resulted in an immediate ban in the U.K. and an extremely watered down, nonsensical 80-minute version released in the US, resulting in hindering the film's overall release worldwide. These actions were contributing factors to its hard-to-find, cult-like status some 40 years later, and the movie has experienced a huge resurgence in popularity and interest in the last decade when Metrograph finally gave the film a proper release in the form of a Director's Cut, 4K DVD box set release.<sup>11</sup> Critics began to blog about its praises, showering it in accolades and hailing it as a long-lost masterpiece of horror cinema.

### CHAPTER 3: NOSFERATU

The latest version of *Nosferatu* by Robert Eggers is the most haunting, frightening and sensual adaptation. It is a modern example for horror cinema that continues to explore female desire through its iconic vampire. To understand where *Nosferatu* first came from, we have to turn to the 1897 novel by Bram Stoker, *Dracula*.<sup>16</sup> One of the most famous novels and first of its kind brings us our first vampire, Dracula. The story was captivating and caught the interest of a German filmmaker Fredrick Wilhelm Murnau in the early 1900s. Following on from the military defeat of Germany in 1918, the country was in a shaken state of poverty and depression. This is the time where the German cinema industry began its Expressionistic film era. German Expressionism was a revolutionary avante-garde film movement which allowed filmmakers to express the inner psychological turmoil and post war anxiety. The style was heavy on its mise-en-scène with high contrast lighting, big, bizarre set design and costume and themes of madness, treason and insanity. F.W. Murnau was eager to adapt Bram's novel *Dracula* into the first ever vampire film as he believed the story was perfect for the German expressionistic film style. Unfortunately, he was unable to get the rights to *Dracula*, however this didn't stop him from making his film. The co-scriptwriter and producer of the film, Albin Grau worked with Murnau to disguise the film's origins by changing names, country settings and even some characteristics of their own vampire, Count Orlok. The local name for vampire-like creatures was 'Nosferatu' and this was

going to be their film title. Murnau's 'Symphony of Horror' *Nosferatu* stands as the pre-eminent expressionist horror film of the Weimar period.<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 10.** Grau's poster design for *Nosferatu* (1922)

A few years later a more romantic and glamorous vampire came to the screen, released as the official first *Dracula* (1931) directed by Tod Browning.<sup>18</sup> Bela Lugosi appears as a charming vampire and more human-like, quite different from Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922). Which was more rat-like with skeletal features and long claws.<sup>20</sup> This opened up the forbidden desire for *Dracula* as a monster. Years later, both *Dracula* and *Nosferatu* have been inspirations to several film remakes and adaptations. *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979) directed by Werner Herzog.<sup>7</sup> This remake paid homage to Murnau's visual language but added psychological complexity and tragic loneliness to the vampire's character. Herzog's version, starring Klaus Kinski and Isabelle Adjani who plays Anna in *Possession* (1981),<sup>21</sup> emphasised emotional depth and carried a more poetic melancholy, reframing the vampire as a creature tormented by his own existence. This film would become the blueprint for the most recent reinterpretation for *Nosferatu* in 2024 that captures not only the gothic style and pure horror of the tale but also portrays seduction and the feminine desire for a truly gruesome monster.



**Figure 11.** Bela Lugosi and Helen Chandler in *Dracula* (1931)

Robert Eggers' adaptation was developed over several years and reflects his long engagement with the mythic and folkloric roots of vampire stories. His previous works include *The Lighthouse* and *The Witch*. Both are historically accurate and stylised visually. Rather than leaning on the romanticised vampires of modern pop culture, Eggers drew on early Balkan and Slavic folklore in which vampires were grotesque, plague-like figures that embodied disease, death, and primal fear. His vision resists the suave, seductive vampire archetype popularised by later films, instead aiming for a creature that is terrifying, grotesque and other-worldly. Starring the daughter of the famous Johnny Depp, Lily-Rose Depp as Ellen Hutter, Nicholas Hoult as Thomas Hutter and the *IT*'s Pennywise actor Bill Skarsgård as Count Orlok.<sup>7</sup>

Set in Germany 1838, The story begins with a young woman called Ellen who wakes up in the night in a teary and begging state, calling out "Come to me" and something whispers a reply in a foreign language "You, You awaken me from an eternity of darkness". Ellen seems to fall under a trance and is beckoned outside her home. She lies on the grass and begins to moan in pleasure before some kind of creature grabs her throat, and she begins a fit of screams and erratic movements. Ellen wakes as if from a dream, and we are introduced to Thomas Hutter, her newlywed husband who comforts her. We learn that Thomas is a young real estate agent living in the port city of Wisborg. His boss, a peculiar and suspicious man by the name of Knock, sends him on a business trip to the remote Carpathian Mountains to finalise a property sale for the reclusive Count Orlok, who intends to purchase a residence in Wisborg. Despite Ellen's visible

distress and ominous premonitions about his journey, Thomas leaves, promising to return quickly. Ellen stays with their friends, a married couple with two children, Friedrich and Anna Harding.<sup>19</sup>

As Thomas travels further east, the environment starts to become more unsettling, isolating, and locals warn him of what lies ahead. When he reaches Orlok's dark castle, Thomas has reached a state of caution and terror. Count Orlok, who hides within the shadows of the candlelight, seems strange and corpse-like. His stay at the Count's castle escalates as Thomas discovers bite marks on his skin, and this soon leads to him discovering what Count Orlok really is. Thomas is eventually weakened and trapped, while Orlok prepares to travel to Wisborg after also learning Ellen. Meanwhile, back in Wisborg, Ellen begins to suffer from intense nightmares and emotional disturbances. She seems psychically affected by Orlok's movement toward the city. Orlok reaches Wisborg by ship, and his arrival coincides with widespread illness, death, which starts panic among the locals and soon a plague breaks out. Professor Albin Eberhart von Franz is introduced as an investigator and soon announces "We are here encountering the undead plague carrier... the Vampyr... Nosferatu!"<sup>19</sup>

Ellen learns that Orlok is drawn specifically to her and that his fixation threatens not only her life but the survival of the city itself. As Thomas struggles to return home, weakened by his imprisonment, Ellen comes to understand that Orlok can be destroyed only through a deliberate act of sacrifice. By keeping him distracted until sunrise, she can ensure his destruction. She sends the others away so she can sacrifice herself. Orlok feasts on her blood until sunrise where he is destroyed by the sun. Thomas arrives too late to find his wife sucked of blood nude underneath the shriveled remains of the Nosferatu vampire.

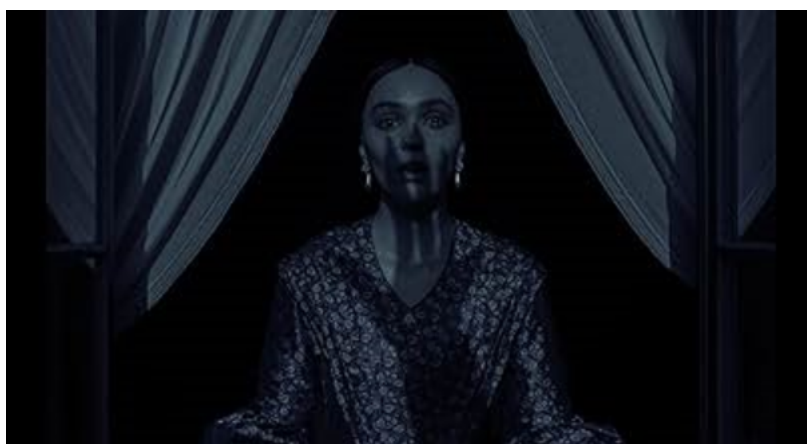


**Figure 12.** Lily-Rose Depp and Bill Skarsgård in the last shot of *Nosferatu* (2024)

The film is about desire, fear, and the bond between Ellen and Orlok at the center of it. When Eggers was asked what his *Nosferatu* meant in an interview he said it's about “The love triangle between Ellen, Thomas and Orlok is at the forefront of any discussion about what this film is.”<sup>22</sup> Eggers also puts Ellen in the focus of the story rather than Thomas, compared to the previous adaptations. It is about a woman who is battling her inner demons and desires to escape from this pain. She calls out into the night for any form of higher power to come to her. She ends up summoning and awakening a vampire, not God or an angel. She tells her husband Thomas mid story “I am unclean”.<sup>19</sup> This can be interpreted in a few ways, such as a reflection of how women are perceived in society, expected to be pure and innocent, especially in the 1880s. Ellen didn't ask for the evil that preys on her, but she still has to carry the burden of guilt, shame and sin. This speaks to how women throughout history have been judged and shamed, even when they are the victims. Female mental health issues would not be taken seriously. Many were just deemed dramatic or diagnosed with hysteria. Vampires have long been symbols of darkness, terror, and the unknown. They reflect social fears and desires forbidden. It can be argued that *Nosferatu* is a physical form of her own melancholia, and he is the only one that can please her and put her out of her misery. However, this brings her shame. “He is my shame. He is my melancholy.”<sup>19</sup>

Vampires represent love as obsession, consumption, and cannibalism. This theme is most striking in the final scene, where *Nosferatu* does not simply bite Ellen's neck like a traditional vampire. Instead, he tears into her chest, devouring her heart, claiming her as

his own. He does not simply want her blood; he wants her essence, her soul. He desires not just to consume her but to own her completely. However, Orlok's presence is not limited to blood-drinking violence; his fascination with Ellen functions as a central tension in the narrative. From the time we meet her, she is given that choice by him "You are not for human kind. And shall you be one with me ever-eternally? Do you swear it?" We hear her swear to be bound by him.<sup>19</sup> This obsession he has with her raise questions about consent, power, and unbidden attraction. His desire is not mutual in a romantic sense but an expression of predation and compulsion. He cannot rest without her. When they meet again, she argues that she was "an innocent child." When she made that promise. Orlok's love seems seductive to Ellen, but it is filled with abuse. She is threatened and taken advantage of physically, mentally, and sexually throughout the film. This is not love; it is possession, torment, and destruction. Desire manifests physically through seizures, exhaustion, and surrender, framing female sexuality as embodied and uncontrollable rather than chosen.



**Figure 13.** Lily-Rose Depp as Ellen Hutter in *Nosferatu* (2024)

The opposite view of this argument is that she loves this feeling Orlok invokes in her, yet she knows it's wrong. A symbol for her female sexuality and perhaps freedom from a traditional marriage. The film consistently contrasts destructive desire with the supposed safety of marriage. Thomas represents marital stability, but this stability is emotionally and sexually insufficient for Ellen, exposing domestic life as restrictive rather than fulfilling. In a fit during the film she states darkly at his feet "You could never please me as he could." This enrages Thomas and he brings intercourse with her. This seeming forceful and unexpected excites Ellen, and she shouts, "Let him see our

love”. We also are informed from the start that the couple have just come back from a honeymoon which Ellen expresses as short lived and after her nightmare she asks him to “take off his shoes” and she grabs him and kisses him. He is the one to pull away as he has work to attend to in the town. Just this moment shows us Ellen’s active sexual desire or perhaps a way to cleanse herself of the nightmare of Nosferatu she had that invoked a disloyal feeling within her.<sup>19</sup>

If we look at Fredrich and Anna’s marriage, which appears to be the ideal marriage. Unfortunately, their two children and Anna die painful deaths and are put away in tomb graves. Fredrich, who falls sick, goes to mourn his dead wife. In an ambiguous way it is revealed that he made love to his wife’s dead body and later also found dead in her arms. This is another relationship in the film that turns its originally pure desires into pain and self-destructive acts but due to Nosferatu. The film’s final act further complicates the notion of marriage as salvation. Ellen’s ultimate sacrifice does not restore her marital union but renders it no longer of use. Ellen also gives herself away in a white dress, holding lilacs that signify purity and innocence. When asked as if at an altar if she is giving herself to him willingly, she says, “I do” and he declares her “oat re-pledged” and that she is now his once souls and fleshs bound together. This moment is very significant, and the tones between fear and desire become blurred. After Orlok kisses Ellen, her breathing is unsteady and for the first time, Orlok’s is also more vulnerable and human-like. The act of intimacy through him drinking her blood from her chest bounds them as sexual intercourse between a newlywed bride and groom on their wedding night.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 14.** Count Orlok feasts on Ellen’s blood in Nosferatu (2024)

At the end, Orlok is caught off guard by the rising sun which brings him to his painful death. This moment shows how powerful Ellen's pull to him is as he has been so powerful and sly with his advancing towards her and his killings. This moment when he screams and burns away as Ellen, who is dying herself, holds him, sparks some odd form of sympathy towards him. From what we know, his spirit was awakened by Ellen years ago, and he had no choice, for him to return to rest he needed her with him. This task of pursuing her was necessary for him. In the end both lay dead in Ellen's bed, lilacs are placed around their bloody bodies. Orlok's body looks vulnerable as it is shriveled and decayed, the complete opposite of attractiveness. He is exposed to the light for what he really was. Ellen, underneath him, covered her own blood. Thomas survives, but the marriage cannot be repaired; it has failed to protect or understand her. The destruction of Orlok does not proclaim marriage as a stable alternative but instead leaves behind a void of loss. Through these contrasts, marriage is portrayed as insufficient for containing female desire and psychological complexity. Ellen's tragedy is not that she turns away from marriage, but that marriage offers her no viable space for recognition, intimacy, or release. The film states marriage as another structure that fails to account for the depth and danger of desire.

The filmmaking style is very prominent and delivers the tragic gothic tale on all levels. Robert Eggers is very critical of his work. He is fixated on fine details and heavy pre-planning went into each shot of *Nosferatu*. His previous work proves this, and *Nosferatu* serves as the next step in his large-scale feature film that is heavy on costumes, lighting, set design and the careful assembly of Orlok's appearance. Eggers stayed very close to the original *Nosferatu*'s German expressionistic style but brought up the tone of desire and fear to a new level. The film's cinematographer Jarin Blaschke has worked on all of Robert Egger's films, and *Nosferatu* show their strong partnership and understanding of the style they are producing on screen. Shot on a 35-millimeter celluloid film as Blaschke stated that digital is too clean, but film can "get messy in a really nuanced way" which he prefers.<sup>22</sup> The camera movement is always controlled by its deliberate pacing and refuses to rapidly release tension. As a result, audiences cannot anticipate what they will be shown, making it more frightening. The camera is bringing the audience unwillingly through the narrative, just as Orlok is pulling Ellen towards him. Composition for each shot is deliberate and calculated. When asked about if it was

deliberate that there were no over the shoulder shoes Blaschke responded “when you go to a photo gallery, do you ever see an over the shoulder shot?”<sup>22</sup> This puts into perspective his intentions visually. Any moment in the film, if paused, works on its own. The lighting is also carefully and intentionally crafted. Shadow serves as the closest point of contact between Ellen and Orlok. This gives a very sensual feeling, as most of these frightening scenes are set at nighttime, and as a result we jump from fear and desire often. Shadows on Ellen’s body seem to caress her. This way we see that Orlok’s power reaches a deeper level inside Ellen. She is frequently framed in half-light, her face divided between illumination and shadow, this showing her inner desire and reality of her situation.

Lily-Rose Depp took the setting of the story to find the means to portray Ellen Hutter. She stated in an interview that the time period gave “a lot less room for women and girls to be much of anything except for exactly what people wanted them to be”<sup>23</sup> As a result you get a female who despite being happily married, still feels angst and pressure of who she has to be. These feelings are what she wants someone else to understand, and a vampire might be the only one who does in this case. Eggers also “Particularly in the 1980s, there was a lot of literary criticism talking about all these Victorian male authors who created these female heroines who have sexual desire and sexual energy and then need to be killed and punished for that,” Eggers explained in an interview.<sup>23</sup> That perhaps only a dark, chthonic female heroine would be the person who could understand the depths. Feminine rage against the restraining and a judgmental society created these feelings within a woman and Ellen’s character delivers them. Eggers also highlighted Depp’s commitment who “worked for months with Marie Gabrielle Rotie, a choreographer, to learn all of the extreme body movement stuff that she does in her hysterical fits and seizures and possessions.”<sup>22</sup>

Earlier versions depict Count Orlok as an animalistic and vaguely menacing with stiff movements which sometimes can be received by audiences as comedic. Eggers was very aware of this as horror can be a fine line away from comedy. Bill Skarsgård’s version of Count Orlok is raw and very threatening. This is achieved through the prosthetic body suit which reveals him as a literal decaying corpse. Created by special effects designer David White, there were over 62 individual pieces and took up to six people to assemble the final look of Orlok.<sup>24</sup> Eggers also intended the costume to be

something never seen on Count Orlok before, dressing him as a Transylvanian nobleman with authentic Hungarian attire from the 16th century. Skarsgård's voice took a lot of work to get it as we hear it. Eggers said that Bill "worked with an opera singer to help him lower his voice an octave and to get that power that he has." and that very little ADR was used in post sound production on his voice.<sup>24</sup> All these elements that make Orlok feel threatening and disgusting, yet his power and dominance is what can be found seductive.

The music composer Robin Carolan stated his approach to the score saying, "I wanted to write it as if it was this sort of fucked up marriage." sums up the sound score of the film literally and bluntly. It plays extremely well with the visuals and is a fear factor in the night scenes. The ending track Bound is very emotional rather than scary; this alongside the visuals of the ending scene evokes mixed feelings to the viewers. Should they be scared or feel bad for Ellen, Orlok, or both? It is very effective as a release to the immense build up. It is an intimate and vulnerable moment between them, as life ends in death in a matter of seconds. Both get what they desire in a sense. The scene is a brilliant showcase of the forbidden desire that many horror films try to achieve. The film therefore reinforces the central argument of this thesis: that horror frequently uses the monster as a vehicle through which female desire can be expressed, explored and ultimately controlled.<sup>24</sup>



**Figure 15.** Count Orlok dying in the morning sun in Ellen's arms in *Nosferatu* (2024)

## CONCLUSION: THE MONSTER WITH US ALL

Through the recurring relationship between woman and monster, horror cinema exposes the tension between desire and social restraint. The monster ultimately functions as a mirror, reflecting the hidden impulses, fears and contradictions that exist within both the characters and the society that condemns them. Returning to Freud's theory, finding pleasure and avoiding pain states that there are exceptions such as trauma victims who relive painful memories, children repeating frightening games, and adults repeat destructive relationships. These repetitions do not bring pleasure, yet they can be consistent. This is evident in Anna in *Possession* as she consistently returns to the abandoned apartment where the monster lurks, constantly returning to Mark where they argue, fight and even have urges to self-harm. This explains why in horror, as characters seem drawn to what brings them harm. Freud's text states that this kind of repetition is not about enjoyment but rather about mastery. It's about the person trying to be the one in control and as a result trauma victims return to what initially hurt them. This explains and confirms Shildrick's points on why women in horror stories are often drawn to monsters. They represent something they wish to conquer and overthrow. In *Nosferatu* at the end, it is Ellen who invites the Count in on the third night willingly. She also sends the others on a wild goose chase, so when the vampire comes, it is just them. She desires that control of the situation, which she feels responsible for.<sup>1</sup>

Anna's bleeding, convulsing body and Ellen's seizures and ecstatic surrender align femininity with bodily excess and loss of control. Both Anna and Ellen undergo changes through their narratives, and both die in their own blood. Their intimacy with monsters does not mark them as atypical but rather reveals how femininity itself is already treated as monstrous within patriarchal systems. Both their marriages fail in death however you cannot help but feel like they did get what they desired through such a chaotic end. Both stories also introduce a third part as a threat to marriage, and this comes in the form of either a corpse like a vampire or a tentacle oozing monster. These woman-monster bonds are not opposites attracting but rather reflects shared abjections.

The men in these stories also suffer. Mark dies painfully next to Anna, while having gone through the extremes to try and get Anna to cooperate in the marriage. Thomas also travels sick as fast as he can to save Ellen from Orlok, trying to hunt the vampire down himself. These male characters show their dedication but still fail to understand

their wives. They both get insulted as sexual partners; they are both physically affected by the feminine desire and lose against the monsters. The monsters both excite the women in ways they cannot help. This freedom lets them fulfil them in ways they think can help complete them, but this is not sustainable. If perhaps *Beauty and the Beast* were in the horror genre, it might mirror these other stories. Female desire is monstrous because it refuses to be resolved by their partners, the society where women are viewed often as sexual objects and not equal. The monster is their savior who can let them explore their feminine desires without judgment, and you see standing. However, this can cause stable marriages to break down or be exposed as the monster recognises what the husband cannot. As in the horror genre, they are more likely to end ambiguously or tragically as this provokes further questions on desire. It is also worth noting that these female-focused films reveal a lot about the male desires. Both directed by very talented and empathic men who knew exactly how to tell these stories.

To conclude this thesis, as a young female director who is also directing a short film about a female who is very passionate about the portrayal of female desire and inner conflicts in films. I am able to understand not only the reasoning for these carefully shaped characters but also the film craft. For my graduate film I am directing a period horror film of a female painter who struggles with depression and past trauma. It is announced that her controlling father is bringing a suitor for her. This fear also gives birth to a ghostly dark figure which is trying to capture her. By studying *Possession* and *Nosferatu* I was able to write not only my lead character more dimensionally but the monster that represents her inner conflicts in her social setting. These films can inspire and help filmmakers challenge their ideas and how to present them on screen. Good horror films are not just about the jump scares or narratives but more about the feelings they provoke. They show the unspeakable. Some of life's experiences are harder to process, and horror films let us try and understand each other and what is lurking deep inside up, something dark inside that is dying to get out.

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