

## ***Nosferatu* Revisited: Monstrous Female Agency in *Penny Dreadful***

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### **Abstract:**

Showtime's *Penny Dreadful* proves to be an intertextual *tour de force* that draws on several literary and filmic sources. This essay argues that F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922) constitutes an important filmic intertext and can facilitate a fruitful understanding of the series' first episode with regard to the representation of its main character Vanessa Ives. Even though almost a hundred years separate one of the prime examples of German expressionist film from this contemporary TV series, the monstrous female agency of Vanessa Ives can be conceptualized and problematized by several narrative and visual congruencies with *Nosferatu*. After first comparing the almost flawless alignment of heterosexual normative gender categories with the characters of Ellen and Hutter from *Nosferatu* and Ethan Chandler from *Penny Dreadful*, Vanessa Ives allows to illustrate an instance of agency, especially via her proclivity for the gaze. Then, the essay turns towards the female acts of transgression in both texts, as they actively gaze at the vampires that they encounter. The confrontation between Ellen and Graf Orlok fulfils an almost paradigmatic formula of female sacrifice and death in film, whereas a similar encounter between Vanessa Ives and a vampire results in the latter's destruction; a later instance then allows describing her as an instance of the seer. Finally, the essay assesses the critical nature of masculinised female monstrosity on the serial screen and the fruitful possibilities that agency and serialisation might offer.

ETHAN CHANDLER. And what's your part in all this?

VANESSA IVES. My part is my own.

### **Foregone Conclusions: Performativity, Heteronormativity and the Transvestite**

1 The monstrous nature of Vanessa Ives proves to be *Penny Dreadful*'s central mystery. An intertextual *tour de force* that draws on literary sources like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in the first episode already, *Penny Dreadful* evokes, as this essay is going to argue, F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922), one of the hallmarks of the expressionist film period, in its wide range of intertexts with almost constitutive similarities and differences. *Nosferatu* uses a negative shot to effectively show how its protagonist Hutter enters the world of Graf Orlok (Weinstock 80). *Penny Dreadful* has Vanessa Ives literally walk into the shadows to search for her friend Mina in a virtual house of horrors. However, while the vampire's wrath and terror constitute a terrifying experience for *Nosferatu*'s male protagonists, they are easily countered by the uncanny potency of Vanessa Ives. Given Vanessa's transgressive differences that constitute an

instance of female agency and result in a monstrous representation, notions of gender serve as a central *tertium comparationis* for a consideration of *Penny Dreadful* and *Nosferatu*.

2 The show opens into darkness.<sup>1</sup> After the intro of the first episode, we hear a woman desperately praying the Hail Mary in Latin. The very first shot shows a room almost bare and the praying woman, whose head is bowed so deeply that it remains unseen. The form of a cross resides above her while light shines down on it from above. When we follow her gaze at the cross, we encounter a spider that crawls along the body of the Christ figure. A moment later, it appears again and journeys from the woman's shoulder up towards her hands where it lifts one arm as if to greet her. In a following long shot similar to the very first one, we see not only the woman's head, but follow her movement upwards as she covers the cross like a dark shadow. Her feet become visible, giving rise to a notion of movement similar to that of the spider, while a close-up of her face, that shows her in a trance-like, almost ecstatic state, is accompanied by a voice saying "Soon, child, soon" and "I'm hungry." When a last close-up shows her neck on the left while a large portion of the screen is left in darkness, the distinctive growl of an animal creates the illusion of a predator hunting in the shadows. The cross, i.e. the signifier of Christianity, superimposes a symmetry on the room. When we still see the woman praying, she is bowing down and hence presented as a part of the principle that orders the room and that has inscribed itself on her very body, as we can see from the cross on her dress. The movement of the spider seems to disrupt the symmetry, a movement that is consequently embodied by the way the woman herself covers the cross. The form of the cross serves as a signifier of both patriarchal culture and the (seemingly) clear divide along the lines of the heterosexual binary. The spider and its movement, however, come to represent the agency of Vanessa Ives, the woman whose prayers we initially heard in the dark.

3 Facilitating an understanding of agency to begin with, this essay will follow Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and consider gender not only as "performatively produced" (34), but also understand it as a "set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time" (45) and stylize the body to perpetuate of the reproductive differences between man and woman (191). Ellen and Hutter in *Nosferatu* as well as Ethan Chandler in *Penny Dreadful* prove to be well within the heterosexual and hence hegemonial paradigm of gender performativity. Accordingly, Ian Roberts' analysis sees Ellen "portrayed as a chaste, morally upright middle-class young woman", who can be thus seen as a "plaything of Hutter

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<sup>1</sup> All references to *Penny Dreadful* will be from the first episode of the first season.

and the patriarchal society within which her repressed self [i.e. normative performativity of identity] is trapped, much as the ball she dangles before the kitten is used to tease and taunt the creature” (48). Hutter, representative of the typical 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois male given his outward appearance (Müller 271), displays a complementary bodily stylization. Thus, Ellen’s and Hutter’s performativity seems to flawlessly accentuate these generic differences between man and woman on which *Penny Dreadful*’s Ethan Chandler relies. Ethan can seemingly act according to both the sexual connotation and Vanessa’s actual conception of the “night work” and in doing so, constantly reasserts and performs male heterosexual norms. During his performance at the Wild West Show, he exhibits an almost exaggerated masculinity; even when he loses his fake beard, the heavy American accent remains and reveals the continuous performance of this masculine subject. As Ethan in a later instance asks for Sir Malcolm as a fellow representative of patriarchy, Vanessa’s rebuttal (“I can speak for him”) clearly accentuates her status as an equal or even superior to him. Vanessa, in contrast to Ellen and despite the similar historical setting of both texts, not merely repeats the feminine norm, but much rather reformulates it.

4 As the subject for Butler comes into being via repeated, signifying processes which establish identity and perform gender (196), agency works as a “variation on that repetition” (198) whose “strategies of subversive repletion” and “local possibilities of intervention” must be subject to feminist analysis (201). Agency does not constitute a singular, but rather constant alteration of the performative repetition and thereby signifies a state of transition from the restrictive, heterosexual paradigm to the possibilities of gender identities. With regard to Vanessa Ives, one particular aspect appears significant: movement. As part of the audience, Vanessa’s attire seems almost indistinguishable from that of the other women who also dress within the parameters of Victorian dress codes. The way, however, Vanessa pertains to that stylization of the body during the midnight venture into the London underworld forms a blatant contrast to the women in *Nosferatu*. Given the fact that *Nosferatu*’s Ellen is depicted to be almost always restricted to a domestic and hence feminised sphere (Risholm 276f., 282), Vanessa’s freedom of movement already sets her apart. While the women in *Nosferatu* react fearfully to the mere mentioning of Orlok’s name, Vanessa’s calm attitude and confident behaviour as well as her ability to move around freely and unhindered during the struggles between Ethan, Sir Malcolm and the vampires denote performative differences to other gendered identities in both *Nosferatu* and *Penny Dreadful*.

5 According to Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, cinematic representations of (masculine) power and (female) powerlessness often function via the

potency of the gaze. Hence, “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (837). Passive “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (837) goes hand in hand with an effort to integrate woman as an “alien presence [...] into cohesion with the narrative” (Mulvey 837). Within an imbalance of power working on two levels, woman is both “erotic object for the characters within the screen story” as well as “for the spectator within the auditorium” (838). As the “power of action” is associated with the masculine, Ann E. Kaplan stresses: “Women receive and return the gaze, but cannot act on it” (121). One primary example would be in the domestic scenes at the beginning of *Nosferatu*; here, Hutter, slings his arm around his wife in a possessive grip and kisses a responsive Ellen while looking down on her. A corresponding scene in *Penny Dreadful* is less domestic and far more explicit. The coitus happens not only with Ethan in a clearly dominant position – he is, among other things, penetrating his partner from behind – but the wagon of his Wild West show serves as backdrop on which his name is written in bold letters on top, and underlined by “The Sharpest Shooting Gunslinger In The West”; these words all effectively framing a portrait of Ethan that is covered by the nameless woman.<sup>2</sup> This directly leads to the farewell kiss that, in the way Ethan holds the woman, is almost reminiscent of the one in *Nosferatu*, but can be traced back throughout the history of mainstream cinema. These two exemplary performative acts constitute a stable heterosexual paradigm as these gazes flawlessly align according to the bodily stylization already noted and reinforce an imbalance of power where woman is made object so that the (male) spectator “can indirectly possess her too” (Mulvey 840).

6 Constituting the implications of female spectatorship means to extend Mulvey’s concept, as done by Mary-Ann Doane. The female subject that Mulvey disregarded in her work has to choose between masochism, i.e. identifying with her subjugated and objectified female counterpart on the screen, and narcissism (Doane 78, 87). The latter implies “oscillating between a feminine position and a masculine position, involving the metaphor of the transvestite” (80). Since transvestitism “is an act that can be performed by both men and women” (Oswald 353), the structures observed are kept intact and ensure that woman then loses feminine characteristics even when man assumes the position of the object (Kaplan 129). Instead of repeating the dichotomy of “male-versus-female-spectator” (231), Rhona J. Berenstein therefore offers a reinterpretation of the spectatorship positions as performative

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<sup>2</sup> As a note: The way the portrait is serving as backdrop for the coitus seems to ironically comment on the notion of identification between spectator and male character, as the latter forms the Lacanian perfect self (Mulvey 836, 838). So even when *Penny Dreadful* seemingly confirms the ideas of classical cinema, it does so with a reflective set design.

(254) and hence open to the notion of agency. *Penny Dreadful* makes a point in drawing attention to Vanessa Ives' proclivity for gazing and inspecting, her resistance to the "refusal of the woman to look" (Williams 83), as if to accommodate the notion of the transvestite's disruptive performativity, e.g. a woman performing via an active gaze. Already as a part of the audience of the Wild West Show, Vanessa's eyes do notably not follow the bullets, but instead focus on Ethan Chandler. The way she looks down at him is revisited during the encounter in the tavern; her firm and upright posture ensures a sense of equality among them and illustrates that his looks on her are matched by a similar, objectifying gaze despite her clear status as woman. Vanessa appears to constantly inspect her environment and achieves the "mastery over the image" (Doane 81) that is reserved for the female transvestite; she can thereby come up with insights into the male subjects around her that allow her to position herself in the mastered environment. This involves trenchant statements about Frankenstein ("You're very proud") and an attentive inspection of Ferdinand Lyle's office. The same emotionless look on her face signifies agency, the metaphorical presence of a transvestite in *Penny Dreadful*, and accentuates a gaze that turns men into objects instead of becoming one herself. As Ethan unsuccessfully tries to hide certain deficiencies in front of her, "hoping I won't notice", Vanessa can come up with an astute analyses of him, as if to define him for her very purposes: "I see a man who has been accustomed to wealth, but has given himself to excess and the unbridled pleasures of youth, a man much more complicated than he likes to appear." Linda Williams states that the "woman's gaze is punished [...] by narrative processes" and that the "horror film offers a particularly interesting example of this punishment in the woman's terrified look at the horrible body of the monster" (85).

### **A Fearful Symmetry: The Transgendering Gaze of the Seer**

7 The prayer scene of the beginning is taken up again shortly before the end of the episode albeit with important alterations. This time, her prayer is heard not in the darkness, but with a view on the door leading into her room. Upon entering it, an over-the-shoulder shot shows us the cross that serves, again, as a source of light and is thereby contrasted with Vanessa's black hair. Then, the camera slowly moves around to get eye-to-eye with her, and as this movement is completed, we can see that Vanessa is not only wearing an outfit different from the scene before, but is keeping her eyes closed. The room is not bare anymore, as two candles in the background serve as a new source of light and seemingly start to levitate in the background while Vanessa's constant whispering continues to accompany

the scene. The falling of the candles disrupts this prayer and makes Vanessa turn around and open her eyes to then behold the scene in front of her: Again, we have a close-up of the cross, which this time, along with everything it stands for, has been upturned and is almost obscured by a large cluster of spiders that now dominate the spectacle. Vanessa's face is petrified when she sees the upturned cross and the swarm of spiders moving along it, but this quickly turns into determination. Her gaze remains directed at the cross regardless of its Christian or demonic instrumentalization and Frankenstein's remark on how "nature abhors symmetry" highlights that its superimposition on the room is not only unnatural, but about to be torn down. The obscurity and darkness of the spiders thereby reiterates the way Vanessa covered the cross when she rose during her first prayer scene. Where one spider represents an instance of Vanessa Ives' agency, the devilish implications of the cross's upturning reveal that with the invasion of the spiders, movement has taken over the scene and symmetry is not merely disrupted, but dissolved. *Nosferatu*'s Ellen was restricted to exist to an *addendum* of the filmic image from whose background she, like so many women before and after her, becomes indistinguishable (Risholm 276, see also Doane 78) so that the monstrous shadow of the vampire can thus break into the home to which she is confined and take her into his possession. As Vanessa gains freedom of mobility and thereby comes to embody the very shadows dominating *Nosferatu* and other hallmarks of the expressionist film period, the symbolic meaning of the spider has changed accordingly, for it now represents monstrous female agency, i.e. the means of destruction for the idealized, normative, gendered body (see also Butler 185).

8 The monster's paradoxical and ultimately dissonant nature resists the very structures which perceive and thereby create it. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" conceives monsters as "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration" (6). Subjugation and exclusion may go hand in hand when "normative categories" diffuse in the monster (11) and the (white) heterosexual male does often constitute the norm to which monsters and the monstrous, especially in gendered terms, are contrasted (Schumacher 127). According to Weinstock, the vampire hereby appears "more manly than any human male" (8) and Dana Oswald also observes that his hypermasculinity goes hand in hand with inflationary displays of "aggression and domination" as "ultra-virility is written on the body" of the vampire or other hypermasculine figures (347). Both Cohen (5) and Williams (88) note the interrelation between woman/femininity and the monstrous based on the difference and exclusion from the aforementioned norm. Cohen sees the "woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender

roles” (9) as prone to a monstrous representation and Williams thereby considers the vampire as a titillating “threat to his [man’s] potency” (90). Oswald herself thereby remarks how especially the act of gender bending is associated with female monsters (353) since these do thereby “adopt corresponding aspects of masculine gender. By doing so, they broaden the concept of gender by becoming, in a sense, transgender individuals” (354). As a category dissociated from the transvestite, a (female) monster implies denaturalization and excess (354). The transvestite destabilizes heteronormative discourses, but agency requires constancy instead of singularity. Monstrous female agency should be understood as a disjunctive and disruptive stylization of the female body with an excessive masculine performativity that continuously goes beyond its heteronormative counterpart.

9 Orlok and Ellen are presented in relation to symmetries, albeit with different effects. Roberts states that Orlok “is filmed behind the window, hands wrapped around the strong *horizontal and vertical bars* which demonstrate that the vampire is as much a prisoner, as much a victim, as Ellen and the others” (46, my emphasis). Ellen’s imprisonment in patriarchy, represented by the cross and its horizontal and vertical axes, becomes evident when she is waiting for her (vampiric) lover at the sea, surrounded by crosses. Ellen Risholm takes this sequence to note the affinity between the vampire and the shadow that *Nosferatu* introduced (279), also observed by Weinstock (82): “The film’s most memorable image, however, arguably is that of the vampire’s shadow creeping up the stairs to Ellen’s room, grotesque hands stretching and elongating toward the door” (81). *Nosferatu*’s Graf Orlok has inspired the appearance of vampires for many years to come (Müller 272), yet the vampire master in *Penny Dreadful* does not just provide the latest example, but his representation takes the key concerns of *Nosferatu* even further. Against the backdrop of Orlok, Hutter can only be seen as the “passive, impotent male” (Bergstrom 197), having already been locked up in the count’s castle over an extended period of time and appearing powerless in the face of this threat when Murnau “cuts for a few seconds to the reactions of the terrified youth [and] returns to the approach [of Graf Orlok]” (Eisner 104). *Penny Dreadful* depicts the vampire’s performative hyper-masculinity in a similar manner when the vampire master enters the scene. Here again, the normative, masculine hero Ethan Chandler falters within the narrative when he is easily thrown aside and incapacitated almost at first strike. In *Nosferatu*, Ellen actively gazes at Orlok out of her window and when she is moving on her bed and encounters another being similar in its difference to man (Williams 86-87). It is remarkable that after having summoned the vampire, Ellen not only “stares at him in wide-eyed terror” (85), but also covers her eyes or turns away in almost painful gesture at these instances. Orlok on the

other hand keeps on staring, i.e. continuously performs (hyper)masculinity via his dreadful gaze even as he moves away. Similar to Ellen, Vanessa also steps in and ensures the vampire master's destruction, but without any notion of victimization this time. His gaze overwhelms in the one instance and is countered in the other.

10 Vanessa's continuous gaze does not result in death, but rather enables her to be part in the monster's destruction. Vanessa's inspecting and emotionless look, the signifier of her agency, remains constant during her search among the bodies in the vampire lair; fright, then, appears on her face when the vampire master rises, but not for long. As the vampire master approaches Sir Malcolm, Vanessa steps in and gazes at the vampire. The high angle shot makes it clear that the camera is now imitating the position of the vampire and hence, the spectator encounters Vanessa's objectification of the vampire via her stern and angry expression; tension arises via the high and shrill sounds accompanying it.<sup>3</sup> Instead of now being punished within the narrative for the "autonomous act of looking" (Williams 97), the vampire master himself is taken aback. Now seen from a low-angle shot that allows the spectator to assume Vanessa's position, he hesitates and looks with awe as she easily defies and defeats his potent gaze. Like Graf Orlok, who could "master her [Ellen] through *her* look" (86), he never keeps his eyes off the woman, even when he is falling down and dying, but his gaze appears evenly matched. Though the vampire master still represents "raw carnal desire, which must be kept in check" (Elsaesser 86), woman, once "expressing that mixture of desire, curiosity, and horror typical of patriarchal culture" (86), takes on a different role. Monstrous female agency as it is represented in the cinema means for woman to gaze actively by going unpunished, as is easily realized by Vanessa. From this point on has become a transgendered monster more masculine than the über-man himself. Unlike Creed, who sees "a unified self [put] into crisis" within the horror film (59), Berenstein positions the appeal and pleasure of horror in the transposition of gender ambiguities in the domain of the spectator (245-47, 261-62). When we as spectators, regardless of any gender, assume first the monster's and then Vanessa's position, this multiplicity of gendered spectator positions beyond any clear binary signification proliferates.

11 Another encounter between Vanessa Ives and Ethan Chandler allows to conceptualize Vanessa's monstrosity. During their meeting at Grandage Place, Vanessa is sitting at the table whereas Ethan remains standing and looks down on her. However, the camera angles make a

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<sup>3</sup> These, of course, are the same sounds that to be heard during Vanessa's trances in the two prayer scenes and during her search for Mina.



point in establishing the same notion of equality as during their last encounter for there are mostly over-the-shoulder and eye-level shots that take Vanessa as point of reference without looking up to or down on Ethan. After a series of extreme close-ups during the dialogue, the cameras only assume a subjective position when Ethan has to pick a Tarot card. Here, Vanessa asserts how looking into her eyes is an essential requirement. Then, the camera looks down from a high angle, imitating Ethan's position, and the spectator can follow his look into Vanessa's eyes before the card is picked, yet through her eyes, we see both him and his wandering hand to account for his hesitation. Her request to "[b]elieve" seems to be directed at all parties involved and her clairvoyant power is thereby realized not only through the active gaze, but by the actual identification with it. Ethan, in an earlier attempt to understand Vanessa, tries to differentiate between the terms of "fortune reader", which is immediately deemed "inadequate", and "spiritualist", to which she agrees. As already connoted by these designations, the witch "is usually depicted as a monstrous figure with supernatural powers and a desire for evil. Her other social functions as healer and seer have largely been omitted from contemporary portrayals" (Creed 76). The seer, then, has been introduced by *Penny Dreadful* and conceptualized via the transgenering power of her gaze. In doing so, woman and monster, by becoming one in Vanessa, do not constitute the other as stated for *Nosferatu*, but rather now exclude man in form of Ethan Chandler, i.e. he who is not (yet) different.<sup>4</sup>

### **Turning the Tide: Agency and Serializing the Horror**

12 The role and status of the female that *Nosferatu* so vigorously puts on display seemingly collides with her representation in *Penny Dreadful*. When Ellen assumes the performative position of the transvestite, this cannot be regarded as an instance of agency, as her final sacrifice, though achieved by it, merely repeats one of many almost paradigmatic moments of female redemption within cultural history (Lange 351, Schumacher 76). Moreover, the masculinised woman reiterates a formula of monsterization (Oswald 353) which goes hand in hand with a representation as a witch, as indicated by numerous examples from English literary texts. One only needs to read (or hear) the words of Banquo in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* directed at the *Weird Sisters*: "What are these, | so wither'd, and so wild in their attire, | That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth, | And yet are on't? | [...] [Y]ou should be woman, | And yet your beards forbid me to interpret | That you are so." (15)

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<sup>4</sup> Viewers who are aware of the revelations in the first season finale can, of course, challenge that assertion quite easily, but not the validity and complexity of the structures here observed.

And Mathilda from Mathew Lewis' *The Monk* seems to be yet another witch that resists clear-cut distinctions between masculinity and femininity:

[H]e grieved that Matilda preferred the virtues of his sex to those of her own; and when he thought of her expressions respecting the devoted nun, he could not help blaming them as cruel and unfeminine. Pity is a sentiment so natural, so appropriate to the female character, that it is scarcely a merit for a woman to possess it, but to be without it is a grievous crime. (Lewis 217)

As Cohen (12) remarks these monsters and many others “declare that curiosity is more often punished than rewarded, that one is better off safely contained within one’s own domestic sphere” (12) while they at the same time continue to fascinate and to attract (16f.). For Margrit Shildrick the “monstrous feminine frustrates distinction, and in threatening to merge strikes at the patriarchal economy of desire” (46). Like all these transgendered monstrosities before her, Vanessa seems to embody a patriarchy that fears the dissolution of hierarchy and hegemony, a *spiritus mundi* still unable to move beyond the binary. Hence, Vanessa could have more in common with Ellen’s fate and fall despite all of her merits and achievements. Other instances of female monstrosity in the media, e.g. the Borg Queen from *Star Trek*, Illyria from *Angel: The Series* and Harley Quinn from the recent *Suicide Squad*, might tell a similar tale of a difference simultaneously elevated and subjugated by the very cultural processes by which they are produced and from which they cannot be separated.

13 The representation of female agency as monstrous in a contemporary TV series appears utterly problematic. When uncovering the virility of the male gaze in cinema, Mulvey wants to “make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides” (834), yet Vanessa’s position as transgendered female within the patriarchal structures underpins her position as a monster. The power of the seer lies in the activity of the gaze, i.e. in the defunctionalisation of a former instrument of suppression. This creates an almost inescapable vicious circle; even though the performative characteristics of the masculine look and the suppression that it implies can easily be uncovered, the fact that agency, i.e. their – successful and continuous – transgression, makes a woman become monstrous immediately undermines this success. Even Butler asks: “Is the breakdown of gender binaries, for instance, so monstrous, so frightening, that it must be held to be definitionally impossible and heuristically precluded from any effort to think gender?” (viii-ix) While it does not necessarily constitute notions of the monstrous and evil, female agency is represented as such. Agency, however, does not imply breaking the vicious circle, but moving along with it

by continuously changing it from within. *Nosferatu*, as a horror film, moves within the confines of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Weimar Germany and, as its narrative is concluded, offers a return from the cinema as a “temporary place” into the “world of comfort and light” (Cohen 17). *Penny Dreadful* rather uses the continuity of serialization that relies on a pattern being both repeated and reformulated and thereby lends itself to the very idea of agency, of leaving and returning to the horror on the screen.

14 The shadowy realm entered by Hutter and Vanessa Ives to encounter the vampire is given a name in *Penny Dreadful*: The “half world between what we know and what we fear”, i.e. the place inhabited by the monstrous, is called the “Demimonde”; this “place in the shadows” continues to haunt characters like Sir Malcom from *Penny Dreadful* even after leaving it. After his encounter with his daughter Mina, he comes to speak of an episode in Africa or in more specific terms of “the moment you realize you are no longer the hunter, you are the prey”. Even though the story is related to Mina, a simple cut to the gazing Vanessa makes clear that she might just as well be the lion who “looks at you” at the turning point of his brief narrative. Looking back at the history of the horror film, with *Nosferatu* as one of its earliest, most famous and constitutive examples, means looking back at a genre where clear performative distinctions perpetuate a heterosexual matrix and woman, no matter if as victim or demon, is deemed the object, with a clear indication of who can be regarded as hunter and who as prey. With the agency and hence active gaze of the seer Vanessa, the noted wind change seems about to come to pass. In 1980, S.S. Prawer writes in his study *Caligari's Children*: “Many members of cinema audiences today will look to the horror-movie for violent shock-images, for titillations of sexual and aggressive instincts which have to take more indirect forms in the entertainments television companies beam into our homes” (5). As the “violent shock-images” transferred from the cinema to the television screen, the new horror format, also to be noted with series like *American Horror Story*, *Hemlock Grove* or *The Walking Dead*, opens up new possibilities for a new audience. No longer must the destruction of the vampiristic monster entail a return of patriarchal order as in *Nosferatu* (Williams 90). Constituting Vanessa Ives as its titillating nexus, *Penny Dreadful*'s polymorphic ensemble becomes all the more deconstructive, subversive and ultimately monstrous as it leaves the Demimonde behind. Even if, given its cancellation in 2016, a satisfactory conclusion to the questions and challenges that the series has posed might be amiss, its central, thematic achievement, uncovered by these almost preliminary remarks on the expository first episode, will not go unmentioned. The serialized horror of *Penny Dreadful* ultimately explores a different theme, reconceptualising the monster and the fear it

embodies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Now, it is no longer solely about how to fight a monster, but how to be one.

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