

## Pandora and the construction of memory in film

Film as a visual medium can both generate and utilize memory instantly with a well-chosen single image. A panning shot over New York City with the two towers of the World Trade Center still intact will instantly remind us of what has been missing since 11 September 2001. And more, any image of the 'Two Towers' entices us to face the consequences of their absence. Images are nowadays more powerful than words, or maybe it has always been like that. Why else were churches adorned with the images of the saints and whole cartoons of the life of Christ? Words might be powerful for some, images retain their power for many due to their instant accessibility within a particular culture. The link between a visual image – whether motionless in a photograph or moving in a film – and memory has become commonplace. Whether it is the photographs of loved ones on the mantelpiece or the last holiday captured on video, we are surrounded by images whose logic and essence is to fix a fleeting moment in order to remind us of its existence later when that moment has long passed. Their unique value is their ability to memorialize an irreplaceable moment in time. An image can bear witness and, in a reductive function, store past events.

In film, however, we do not only deal with a single image, a single word, but rather with a complex language. As previous research on the semiotics of film has shown,<sup>1</sup> there is no doubt that film – just like language – does generate meaning through specific systems – from editing to cinematography – that function within similar structures as communication. The meaning of a particular shot, *mise-en-scène*, or illumination of a specific character on screen is constructed, however, within a wider system for generating meaning: "that of culture itself,"<sup>2</sup> as Graeme Turner phrases it.

The relevance of culture, as the context determining our interpretation of the connotative meaning of particular images, is illustrated by Roland Barthes in his *Camera Lucida*. Here, Roland Barthes describes the palpable distance or separation between the viewer and a photograph of a person wearing clothes that are long out of fashion and identifies it as a symbol of their confinement in history. The fewer the items and accessories that relate the image to the viewer's world, the greater the distance between himself and the world portrayed. However, despite its datedness, the photograph of his mother can waken in himself "the rumpled softness of her crêpe de

<sup>1</sup> See for example Barthes, Roland. *Image Music Text* (trans by Stephen Heath; London: Fontana, 1977), Christian Metz, *Film Language: Semiotics of the Cinema* (Trans. Michael Taylor; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1974), Robert Stam, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Poststructuralism and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 1992), Jonathan Bignell, *Media Semiotics* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> See Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 44.

Chine and the perfume of her rice powder.”<sup>3</sup> His associations are kindled by personal memories, which a motion picture cannot necessarily achieve. Stock characters, point of view shots, and an emotionally engaging narrative, however, all help to connect the viewer to the diegesis.

Not many of us, however, would choose to identify with Pandora nor any of the other female predators, “deadly dolls” or “lethal lovelies”,<sup>4</sup> as they have little in common with most of the audience’s personal experience. But as the function of the *femme fatale*’s stereotypical representation in the visual arts is related to memory, I focus in this essay on the image of the *femme fatale* or dangerous vamp in an effort to analyse the significance of memory in film in the context of stereotyping. My discussion of the symbolic rationale of this stereotype will be focused on the relation between categorization and memorialization while addressing the vamp’s stereotypical imagery in a number of films from G.W. Pabst’s *Die Büchse der Pandora* (*Pandora’s Box*, 1929) to Brian de Palma’s *Femme Fatale* (2003). The signifying practices of film lie bare when the camera focuses on the *femme fatale*: whether a scantily clad Marlene Dietrich comes first to mind, a stone-faced Rita Hayworth, or whether we think of the opening scene of de Palma’s latest film, in which – in an emblematic doubling of the symbolic code – Rebecca Romijn-Stamos lies naked on a bed watching the closing sequence of Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* of 1944, starring Barbara Stanwyck as the epitome of a “deadly doll”. Through the reflection of Romijn-Stamos’s face on the television screen, we too watch Barbara Stanwyck shoot her lover (Fred MacMurray) and declare herself to be “rotten to the heart.” This doubling emphasises the *femme fatale*’s functions as icon, symbolic image, and code. Her representation in films has its own established history of more than 80 years, and – due to its basis in literary history, beginning with Pandora in Greek mythology and Salomé in the Bible – is easily recognised as yet another depiction of the well-known stereotype.

First used in the realm of printing, the term ‘stereotype’ refers to a metal plate used in a printing press, while ‘stereotyping’ defines the process of duplicating printing plates by filling a plaster matrix with molten metal. Already in 1922, however, in his book *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann applied the word ‘stereotype’ to a radically different context, using it for the first time in reference to mental images. But it was not until the late 1980s that stereotypes and memory were clearly linked by social psychologist Patricia Devine, who pointed out that the stereotype has to be available in memory to function as a stereotype in the first place. Devine’s work shows that if a stereotype does exist in memory, it is activated automatically when a member of a

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Trans. Richard Howard; London: Vintage, 1993), p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Terms coined by Chris Holmlund in *Impossible Bodies* (London: Routledge, 2002), see especially pp. 71-90.

stereotyped group is encountered.<sup>5</sup> The connection between an image – as a stimulation of the sensory centre of the brain – and memory, however, was already made at the end of the nineteenth century by Henri Bergson in his *Matière et mémoire, essai sur la relation du corps à l’esprit* (1896).<sup>6</sup> In this philosophical study, Bergson was concerned primarily with the selection and recognition of images, but also queried the continued existence of these images within the mind and explored the possibility of recurring recollections of similar images creating codes that would enable instant interpretations and reactions.

Stereotypes are entirely dependent on our recollection and familiarity with the visual code. Due to the ever-growing abundance of stories that link beauty and obliteration, sexual desire and doom, our collective memory is filled with readily available elucidations. Cultural identities usually depend on the sharing of some kind of collective memory which again is often based on clear definitions of belonging and otherness. Stereotypes help to give structure and order to memories, and therefore to identities and communities. Like dead friends, their “interiorization,” as Derrida calls it, is “inevitable”.<sup>7</sup>

When we think of the sexual woman, vamp, or the *femme fatale*, we probably all share the memory of certain stories. The sexual woman, the demonic seductress, the siren who brings doom and destruction not only to Ulysses’ men has been a stock character in literature and art since antiquity. Probably the most (in)famous personification setting the scene for the conception of the stereotype is Pandora, the stunningly attractive woman – a divine creation after all – who, in the Greek myth (Hesiod, 700 BC), disseminated evil among men forever. In the Bible, of course, we have Eve, who supposedly messed things up for all of us, or Salomé, who danced for Herod and had John the Baptist’s head for a prize. Among the numerous literary characters that helped to firmly establish the stereotype are Marston’s *Insatiate Countess* (1613), Gryphius’s *Celinde of Cardenio und Celinde* (1657), Milton’s Delila in *Samson Agonistes* (1671), Diderot’s Mme Reymer in *Ceci n’est pas un conte* (1798), Goethe’s vampyric *Braut von Korinth* (1798), Oskar Wilde’s *Salomé* (1893), and – most importantly for German cinema – Wedekind’s Lulu in his scandalous plays *Erdgeist* (1895) and *Die Büchse der Pandora* (1902).

Although well established and popular for centuries, it was especially during the fin-de-siècle that the *femme fatale* captured the imagination of writers as well as artists

<sup>5</sup> See Patricia G. Devine, “Stereotypes and prejudice: Their automatic and controlled components.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 56 (1989): 5-18.

<sup>6</sup> For an English translation, see *Matter and Memory* (London: Unwin, 1911), especially chapter 2 “Of the Recognition of Images”.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida’s essay on “Louis Marin (1931-92),” *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 139-64; here p. 159.

- such as Aubrey Beardsley, Max Klinger, Gustave Moreau, Franz von Stuck, Félicien Rops, and Robert Barret Browning, to name but a few.<sup>8</sup> Recreations of the Pandora and Salomé myths focused Victorian fears regarding female sexuality and emphasised the need for its containment. From the beginning, cinema cashed in on modern society's fascination with and trepidation of female sexuality. Already during the era of silent cinema, the figure of the vamp or *femme fatale* flourished, the woman as 'other' whose alluring sexuality brings doom and destruction to man.<sup>9</sup> Looking back on a long tradition in literature, the basis for the cinematic representation of the fatal woman in twentieth-century cinema is to be found in Europe around 1900, when cities like Berlin or Paris grew almost explosively, as did the numbers of prostitutes working the streets and brothels causing concern for the moral and physical well-being of bourgeois society and its tight-lipped Victorian culture. At the same time, women activists broke the silence and took to the streets rallying for equal rights, questioning the patriarchy, condemning the exploitation of proletarian women and prostitutes, and thereby causing upheaval across Europe. This increase in public presence led to a scholarly concern aimed at controlling female sexuality (and venereal diseases - thereby signifying the sexual woman as concealing disorder and contagion).<sup>10</sup>

Supposedly interested in the 'true' nature of woman, "the scientific community felt compelled to explore perceived biological, psychological, and physiological traits that set women apart from men."<sup>11</sup> Around 1900, women were considered weak and intellectually deficient, not only by German neurologist Paul Möbius,<sup>12</sup> but it was also their 'nothingness' that disconcerted some male academics at the time. Möbius' contemporary Otto Weininger, wrote in his best-selling *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Sex

<sup>8</sup> In 2003, an exhibition in the Groninger Museum, the Netherlands, and the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, Belgium was solely devoted to the *femme fatale* in art from 1860-1910.

<sup>9</sup> For a definition of the 'vamp', see Annette Kuhn's *The Women's Companion to International Film* (London, Virago, 1990), p. 409; and Mary Ann Doane's introduction to her book *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York, Routledge, 1991), pp. 1-16.

<sup>10</sup> For prostitution and hysteria in French culture see Jann Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, New York, Columbia UP, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> This criminalisation of uncontained sexuality must be seen within the context of bourgeois moral culture in which sexuality was carefully confined. Its space was the parents' bedroom, its function was reproduction. The "principle of secrecy" prevailed, as Michel Foucault called it. Cf. Barbara Hales, 'Blonde Satan: Weimar Constructions of the Criminal Femme Fatale,' in Christiane Schönfeld (ed.), *Commodities of Desire: The Prostitute in Modern German Literature*, Rochester, Camden House, 2000, pp. 131-152; here p. 131.

<sup>12</sup> Female sexuality was to be controlled physically, socially, and morally via pregnancy and maternity. Neurologist Paul Möbius convincingly predicted serious illness to any woman that chose independence over motherhood. Every respectable girl at the time assumed her future as wife and mother, for releasing passion uncontained within the patriarchal construct of marriage meant expulsion from society.

and Character, 1903) that woman is nothing, and only therefore can she be anything.<sup>13</sup> It is in this flexibility that Weininger suspected her power. Her ambivalence, that ability to respond to desire, to be anything you want her to be, makes her illegible and therefore dangerous. The core of her illegibility is woman's sexuality and it is here that the locus of peril is assumed. Therefore, in an effort to control the untamed, criminologists like Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero in Italy were quick to polarise rigorously between mother and whore, between normal, reproductive woman and dangerous, sexual vamp as the 'other' - situated outside the 'normal' realm and destined to criminal behaviour.<sup>14</sup>

The sexual - childless - woman (who refused to let her sexuality be contained by pregnancy and motherhood) was the shocking antipode to the chaste bourgeois daughter or wife and undoubtedly the one with the higher market value in the emerging medium of film. Already in 1920, Robert Wiene, the acclaimed director of the expressionist masterpiece *Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari* (The Cabinet of Dr Caligari, 1919) shot *Genuine*, a film about an untamed, wild seductress and vampire. As the term *vamp* suggests, the sexual woman is associated with the vampire, who drains men of their vital fluids. Here, the title also insinuates that this woman is genuine and the *true* nature of woman is that of the vampire. This blatant connection between the vampire and the beautiful temptress has been made time and again, especially in the soft-core porn milieu.<sup>15</sup>

It comes as no surprise that the *femme fatale* has been incorporated into the visual narratives of the medium film. Questions of morality and sexuality, addiction and independence, uncertainty and fear could be raised while satisfying the audience's scopophilic and voyeuristic desires. As I have pointed out, the *femme fatale* functions in film within a recognizable system. Directors usually choose signifiers from a well-known *femme fatale* iconography, such as an attractive physical appearance, a beautiful, sensual face with a fearless and yet seductive gaze, revealing yet elegant clothing, and long fingers with long fingernails holding cigarettes (preferably in long holders) emphasizing her phallic ambitions. In all *femme fatale* films, binary oppositions are created - first and foremost between the vamp and her prey - in order to establish a structure that embodies the essence of the myth's culture: we are reminded of the source of society's tension, of the essential, ancient conflict between man and woman, of the underlying disorder and tribulation concerning the origins of mankind.

<sup>13</sup> Otto Weininger, *Geschlecht und Charakter*, Vienna, Braumüller, 1903, p. 394.

<sup>14</sup> See *La donna delinquente: La prostituta e la donna normale* (1893).

<sup>15</sup> One of the most successful films of this genre has been Franco Jesus' *Les Avaleuses* (also known as *Bare Breasted Countess* (cut version), *Erotic Kill*, *Female Vampire*, and *Insatiable Lust*, all 1973). Again, the director tells the story of a beautiful female vampire who lures men to their doom via her insatiable sexual desire, and identifies the female body as locus of all evil.

An early representation of a child-like yet no less deadly *femme fatale* was Louise Brooks in G. W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box* of 1929, based on Frank Wedekind's aforementioned 'Lulu' plays. Still a silent picture, the close-ups of body-parts – Louise Brooks' lively, fiery eyes, her sensual mouth, the soft curve of a bare shoulder, and especially her naked, kicking legs – has hugely impacted on female representation in film.

As Laura Mulvey points out: "It is as though the scopophilic draw of the cinema, the flickering shadows, the contrasts between light and dark become concentrated in and around the female form." The female body has become the ultimate screen spectacle and "representations of female sexuality slip into 'to-be-looked-at-ness'."<sup>16</sup> This fetishising of the female form has dominated the cinematography in *femme fatale* films every since. Even in the most recent depiction, the camera in Brian de Palma's *Femme Fatale* seems to be lured towards the stunning beauty's bare skin, and time and again, we are reminded that her physical beauty is both the precondition and motivation of events to come.

In 1930, the archetypal cinematic *femme fatale* was created in Josef von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel* (The Blue Angel), the picture that turned Marlene Dietrich into a star overnight. The film was not only hugely successful but also instrumental in the establishment of a certain female stereotype, and her quintessential embodiment impacted on European and Hollywood cinema to a significant degree. *The Blue Angel* is the story of Professor Rath (Emil Jannings), a bourgeois schoolmaster who becomes infatuated with the *femme fatale* or the personification of his repressed desires embodied by the cabaret singer Lola Lola. His attempt to legalise and contain Lola's sexuality via the bourgeois institution of marriage proves to be fatal. Five years after his vitalistic liberation, Rath is devoid of all dignity, a mere object, an attraction to be laughed at. At the same time that Rath is publicly abused as the stage clown by the head of the cabaret (Kurt Gerron), Lola is making out with another artist (Hans Albers), highlighting her infidelity. After this final humiliation, Rath returns to his old school and dies at his desk, once more embraced by the spotlight, only this time it is the porter's flashlight that reminds us of the lovers' first encounter.

Then, the space of the sexual woman – the cheap nightclub – which Professor Rath enters only in order to save his students from the assumed corruptive influence of the sexual woman, is clearly marked with symbolic images such as nets and cages. The general chaos underlines that this space is indeed a dangerous trap that will undoubtedly lead to confusion, bondage, and disintegration. The film's match-cuts between the disorientated schoolmaster making his way through the chaos of the club and the women on stage to whom he is inevitably drawn, establish a visual bond that centres on the sexual woman. For there, in the centre and close-up, Marlene Dietrich, scantily clad and singing in her huskily distinctive voice, is fixed and held by the

<sup>16</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 56.

camera to ensure her readability. Both visually and aurally erotic, she is positioned for "the pleasure and reassurance of the male spectator."<sup>17</sup> She becomes a spectacle, further objectified by the amount of props surrounding her, but stands confidently in the centre with her hands on her hips and flaunts an outfit that reveals most of her attractive features. It is only during the initial moments of this first encounter with the *femme fatale* Lola Lola on stage that Rath communicates the dominating power of the male gaze. At this point, he still possesses economic and social superiority, but despite his repulsed confusion he adores her, while Lola Lola functions as an erotic object. But all too soon it is she who gazes and objectifies. While singing a song that establishes her as the dominant party ("Heute such' ich mir was aus! Einen Mann, einen richtigen Mann! – Tonight I'll choose a man! A man, a real man!"), she confines the schoolmaster by way of a spotlight.

The closing sequence of this film is the professor's last journey back to his old school, which is match-cut with Lola Lola's wide legged performance of her famous song known in the English version as "Falling in Love Again" emphasising her interest in love-making and nothing else. And if men get burnt in the process, that surely wasn't her problem.

This film is based on the novel *Professor Unrat* by Heinrich Mann, first published in 1905. The toppled authoritarian of the book here becomes the pitiable victim of a vamp who is the source of anarchy, chaos, and ultimately death. Lola Lola personifies the sexual/phallic woman that remains a deeply ambivalent figure: she gives liberation, life and sensuality, but at the same time, she exudes danger and eventually ruin. The force and menace of female sexuality is once more emphasised by Lola Lola's final song. Clearly this woman is unwilling to preserve patriarchal law and sacrifice her desire to that of the male Other. Therefore, her actions must be labelled as negative, which Sternberg achieves by confronting Marlene Dietrich's sexual power with the heartbreaking destruction of a gentleman, educator, and upstanding member of bourgeois society.

After filming *The Blue Angel*, Joseph von Sternberg took Marlene Dietrich back to Hollywood's Paramount studios and in the next five years directed *Morocco* (1930), *Dishonoured* (1931), *Shanghai Express* (1932), *Blonde Venus* (1932), *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), and *The Devil is a Woman* (1935). All starred Marlene Dietrich, thus firmly establishing the stereotype of the *femme fatale* in American film production.<sup>18</sup> The *femme fatale* became the female archetype of *film noir* – *film noir's* fantasy one could say

<sup>17</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femme Fatales*, p. 101.

<sup>18</sup> Not even Louise Brooks, who had fascinated audiences as the seductive female lead in G. W. Pabst's German productions *Pandora's Box* and *Diary of a Lost Girl* (both 1929) and returned to Hollywood, could compete with Marlene Dietrich's depiction of the 'female archetype'.

- epitomised by Rita Hayworth, Barbara Stanwyck, and Joan Crawford. In the 1940s and 1950s, 'Black Widow' or 'Spider Woman' films were particularly popular, such as Roy William Neill's *Spider Woman* (1944), Arthur Lubin's sequel *The Spider Woman Strikes Back* (1946), or Nunnally Johnson's *Black Widow* (1954) with Ginger Rogers, based on the novel *Fatal Woman* by Patrick Quentin.

In 1987, the year of the sensational success of Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction*, in which Michael Douglas soon comes to regret his one night stand with Glenn Close, who turns out to be a dangerous maniac out to destroy him and his family, Bob Rafelson picked up the theme of the merciless spider woman once again. In his *Black Widow*, Debra Winger plays a cop who tracks down serial murderer Theresa Russell in Hawaii. The film opens with a close-up of Theresa Russell's eye that appears doubled in a mirror. We don't see her face, we see a mirror image of only one part of her face. Her face is split in half and at the same time doubled, seemingly creating a whole that is none. Inscribing her being as doubled and fake, the director's reference to this woman's ambivalence immediately points towards her power. Her intentions remain unclear, but putting on her shades, she signifies her privilege to see and know. Already in this opening shot, a destabilization of the spectator-text relationship occurs, while the female lead claims for herself the masculine subject-position. The secrecy implied heightens the suspense and the sense of danger, but also calls for a violent unveiling, as Mary Ann Doane<sup>19</sup> suggests. The audience's desire for an unveiling of the *femme fatale* is clearly called upon and accentuated by the leading lady's changeability and flexibility. Here, the *femme fatale* uses her flexibility specifically to become the next victim's ideal and dream, changing her looks and manner completely with every new man.

Illusion, secrecy, and ambivalence are essential to *femme fatale* representations, from the early *film noir* depictions to Paul Verhoeven's portrayal of the bisexual murder mystery writer played by Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* (1992) to, again, de Palma's *Femme Fatale* in which he transforms the entire paradigmatic and fully expected 'noir' narrative into a dream sequence. The *femme fatale*'s confusing ambivalence is further emphasised by her bisexual behaviour, which links films such as *Black Widow*, *Basic Instinct*, or *Femme Fatale* to the cinematic history of the archetype and very early depictions of the stereotype in Pabst's *Pandora's Box* of 1929.

The classic *femme fatale* as the ambivalent predator is without doubt still an icon in today's Hollywood film production. A *Night at McCool's*<sup>20</sup> (2002) by Norwegian

<sup>19</sup> Mary Ann Doane writes: "The *femme fatale* ... harbours a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable. In thus transforming the threat of the woman into a secret, something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered, the figure is fully compatible with the epistemological drive of the narrative, the hermeneutic structuration on the classical text. Sexuality becomes the site of questions about what can and cannot be known." See *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> In keeping with the theme, the video clip of A-ha's 'Velvet' on the sound track to the film features fatal women killing the members of the band scantily clad and armed with a pistol or a blow-

director Harald Zwart, for example, incorporates all the elements of the traditional stereotype: the seemingly sweet, innocent, beautiful woman (Liv Tyler) in a low-cut, tight fitting red dress so attractive that men only have to gaze to be completely under her spell. Within little over an hour, the seductive and manipulative Jewel, the true Pandora, betrays and kills ex-boyfriend Utah, his twin-brother (both Andrew Dice Clay) and a rich lawyer (Eric Schaeffer), is instrumental in the deaths of a policeman (John Goodman) and another lawyer (Paul Reiser), and manages to ruin the life of Randy the barkeeper (Matt Dillon).

Multiple points of view and flashbacks illustrate woman as dangerous nothingness, as anything man wants her to be. 'Jewel is many things to many men' is her introduction in the trailer. The film's structure is dominated by the worn-out barkeeper's narrative, who warns her potential assassin Michael Douglas (who in the end, of course, is also spellbound and taking her home rather than out): 'You have no idea what this woman is capable of!' She walks away, they cannot. She is nothing and everything, unclassifiable, and not only an epistemological nightmare. Whatever her essence might be - it is dangerous and might be fatal the audience is warned.

*Femme fatale* films all offer the female lead with familiar and therefore recognisable traits - attractive, sexual, confident, manipulative - that are highlighted by way of camera movement (close-ups especially), lighting, editing and so on. The longevity of this image, however, is not due to a mere duplication, but rather to its flexibility, which connects its history and our collective memory with our individual fears and desires. Liv Tyler's beautiful red lips and batting eyes match-cut with Matt Dillon's completely destroyed living room (if not life) functions as, in the words of Roland Barthes, "a highly elaborate signifier of a readily syntactical order"<sup>21</sup> that can easily introduce moral values into the reading of a particular image or scene. Here, memory creates the basis for amplification; it is our recollection of the multitude of stories and images of threatening sexual women that leads to an intensification and clarification of this particular image on screen. The purely 'denotative' status of the image, the "perfection and plenitude of its analogy, in short its 'objectivity', has every chance of being mythical."<sup>22</sup> What is more, the whole range of analogical reproductions refer to a particular culture that is familiar with the aesthetic and ideological code of the image presented.

Film ensures our understanding or tapping into the right memories - by coding each image. The wide-legged pose of Marlene Dietrich is just as effective visually as a

dryer - the latter being fatal for the one member of the band relaxing in a hot bath. The third man is found dead in the freezer clutching his guitar - a flashback to the sexy female closing the lid of the freezer clearly establishes her as at once sexual and destructive.

<sup>21</sup> Roland Barthes, "Le message photographique", *Communication* 1, 1961; in: R.B. *Image Music Text* (trans by Stephen Heath; London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 15-31. Here p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

match-cut between a beautiful woman and utter mayhem (that could have been caused only by her...). *Mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and editing all add to the "second meaning" (Barthes) of the visual message, the supplementary message that ensures the 'correct' reading of the visual text. Images that are repeated time and again, like that of the *femme fatale* with her easily recognisable regalia, not only create a sensation within the audience that stimulates our recollection of other representations of this stereotype, but lead to a motor reaction that automatically limits the way in which we interpret the woman on the screen in front of us. As Henri Bergson argued in his book on *Matter and Memory*, in the case of a motor mechanism, judgement becomes a mere reflex. Every new representation of a *femme fatale* – be it in the form of Sharon Stone, Liv Tyler, or Rebecca Romijn-Stamos – can therefore act as an external stimulus, automatically tapping into the memory-images we have stored up and triggering motor memory: the woman on the screen is beautiful, sexy, ambivalent, secretive – and therefore dangerous.

Our memory functions as a second vibration. We consume visual images and contextualise them within our personal system of knowledge. This is where stereotypes come in handy: stereotypes can assume the audiences' familiarity with them and therefore an additional layer to the image is immediately constructed. Just like memorials rely on their readability, so do stereotypes conveniently fall back upon already established memories. Their code of connotation is a cultural and especially historical one. When we watch Marlene Dietrich, Sharon Stone or Liv Tyler on screen, their gestures, poses, attitudes and expressions equip their image with meanings that are entirely historical on one level and decidedly personal on another. The distance between the image and the audience or spectator will always be palpable, but the visual codes employed might waken in us the sound of Marlene Dietrich's husky voice or a recollection of Louise Brooks' youthful smile. Due to its history, every new representation of the stereotype might also communicate the memories of Adam's ill-fated seduction by Eve in the Garden of Eden, witches burning at the stake, the muffled sexual behaviour of the Victorians, Paul Möbius's call for the containment of female sexuality through motherhood, and time and again the memories of those who fell prey to female predators: from Emil Jannings to Michael Douglas, fusing collective and individual memory to unfasten and exclude. At the same time, however, it is exactly her visual connotation – like every well-structured signification – that integrates and reassures.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Roland Barthes said that the "photographic connotation, like every well structured signification, is an institutional activity; in relation to society overall, its function is to integrate man, to reassure him." *Ibid.*, p. 31.

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