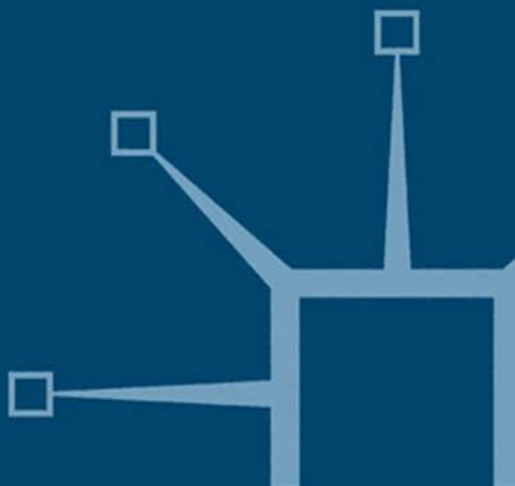


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**The *Femme Fatale*:
Images, Histories, Contexts**

Helen Hanson
Catherine O'Rawe



The *Femme Fatale*: Images, Histories, Contexts

Also by Helen Hanson

HOLLYWOOD HEROINES: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film

Also by Catherine O'Rawe

AUTHORIAL ECHOES: Textuality and Self-Plagiarism in the Narrative of
Luigi Pirandello

The *Femme Fatale*: Images, Histories, Contexts

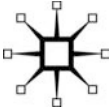
Edited by

Helen Hanson

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*Dedicated to the memory of Gerry O'Rawe (1929–2008)
and Margaret Hanson (1933–2009)*

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xi
Introduction: 'Cherchez la femme' <i>Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe</i>	1
1. Ecoutez la Femme: Hear/Here Difference <i>Griselda Pollock</i>	9
Part I Literary and Visual Archetypes	
2. The Mother of All <i>Femmes Fatales</i> : Eve as Temptress in Genesis 3 <i>Karen L. Edwards</i>	35
3. Challenging the Stereotype: The <i>Femme Fatale</i> in <i>Fin-de-Siècle</i> Art and Early Cinema <i>Jess Sully</i>	46
4. Silent Divas: The <i>Femmes Fatales</i> of the Italian <i>Cinema Muto</i> <i>Joy Ramirez</i>	60
5. 'You'll Be the Death of Me': Mata Hari and the Myth of the <i>Femme Fatale</i> <i>Rosie White</i>	72
Part II Film Stars	
6. Diabolically Clever – Clouzot's French <i>Noir Les Diaboliques</i> (1954) <i>Susan Hayward</i>	89
7. Fatal Femininity in Post-War British Film: Investigating the British <i>Femme</i> <i>Melanie Bell</i>	98

8. 'Put the Blame on ... Mei': Zhang Ziyi and the Politics of Global Stardom <i>Olga Kourelou</i>	113
9. Gender, Genre and Stardom: Fatality in Italian Neorealist Cinema <i>Catherine O'Rawe</i>	127
Part III Femmes Fatales in European and World Cinemas	
10. The <i>Femme Fatale</i> of Spanish Retro <i>Noir</i> : The Recuperation of a Repressed Voice <i>Ann Davies</i>	145
11. <i>Chiaroscuro</i> : The Half-Glimpsed <i>Femme Fatale</i> of Italian <i>Film Noir</i> <i>Mary Wood</i>	157
12. A Myth Is Born: The <i>Femme Fatale</i> in the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema <i>John L. Marambio and Marcie Rinka</i>	170
Part IV Hollywood	
13. 'I Can't Tell Anymore Whether You're Lying': <i>Double Indemnity</i> , <i>Human Desire</i> and the Narratology of <i>Femmes Fatales</i> <i>Steve Neale</i>	187
14. 'Well, Aren't We Ambitious', or 'You've Made up Your Mind I'm Guilty': Reading Women as Wicked in American <i>Film Noir</i> <i>Julie Grossman</i>	199
15. The Big Seduction: Feminist Film Criticism and the <i>Femme Fatale</i> <i>Helen Hanson</i>	214
<i>Index</i>	229

Illustrations

1. Image of Herbert Draper's 'Ulysses and the Sirens' from Bridgeman Art Gallery 9
Credit: Ulysses and the Sirens, 1910 (oil on canvas) by Draper, Herbert James (1864–1920)
© Leeds Museums and Galleries (City Art Gallery)
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Nationality / copyright status: English / out of copyright
2. Maud Allan as Salome, in the play by Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) 52
Credit: Photo by Hulton Archive Getty Images
3. Image from *Assunta Spina* (1915) 60
Credit: Source BFI
4. Image of Greta Garbo in *Mata Hari* (1931) 73
Credit: MGM / The Kobal Collection / Bull, Clarence Sinclair
5. Press Materials for *Easy Money* (1948) 104
Courtesy of Cinema Library
Credit: The Steve Chibnall archive
6. Image from *Ossessione* (1943) 127
Credit: Industria Cinematografica Italiana / The Kobal Collection
7. Image from *Il Bandito* (1946) 157
Credit: DI Laurentiis/Lux Film / The Kobal Collection
8. Image of Maria Felix 171
Credit: The Kobal Collection
9. Image of Gene Tierney in *Laura* (1944) 200
Credit: 20th Century Fox / The Kobal Collection

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Jess Sully completed an MPhil in Comparative Literature and History of Art at Goldsmiths College, University of London in 2006; her thesis challenged the prevalent stereotype of the *femme fatale* in art and literature, c.1850–1910, with a particular emphasis on Symbolism and Decadence. She now works for a government-funded project that accelerates innovation in the creative industries by bringing together creative businesses, technology developers and other interested parties to share ideas and inspiration.

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Introduction: 'Cherchez la *femme*'

Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe

The dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction is among the oldest themes of art, literature, mythology and religion in western culture. She is as old as Eve, and as current as today's movies, comic books and dime novels.

(Place 1998: 47)

She appears time and again in art, poetry and fiction either in her mythical forms or in contemporary guise: she can be prostitute, man-hunting aristocrat, vampire, African queen, native (black) woman or murderess. She crosses boundaries of class and race.

(Stott 1992: viii)

This collection of essays seeks to engage with figurations of the *femme fatale* in a wide range of cultural texts, at different socio-historical junctures and in distinct national/geographical terrains. The idea for the collection arose from a distinct sense that, while the *femme fatale* figure is a recurrent presence in both popular and high culture, the figure is a perennial site of uncertainty, raising challenging questions and inviting further investigation.

The *femme fatale* is thus read simultaneously as both entrenched cultural stereotype and yet never quite fully known: she is always beyond definition. This sense of mystery, of a concealed identity always just beyond the visible surface, is common in critical discussions of the *femme fatale*. Indeed, Mary Ann Doane opens her influential discussion of the *femme fatale* by positing unknowability as her key feature: 'the *femme fatale* is the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential

epistemological trauma. For her most striking characteristic, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be' (Doane 1991: 1).

Conventionally, the *femme* is, in diegetic and critical terms, both unknowable and an index of unknowability, always representing more than can be articulated. Doane's model of epistemological trauma emphasizes and interrogates the 'legibility' of the *femme*, the fetishism of her powerfully attractive visual appearance, which is held in tension with the desire to uncover her hidden essence. In addition, the 'secret' of the *femme*, her motivation, her essence, where she comes from, makes her a readable figure for 'the epistemological drive of narrative itself, the hermeneutic structuration of the classical text' (Doane 1991: 1).

Given her status as locus of mystery, it is appropriate that in the twentieth-century context the *femme fatale* figure has often been looked for and located within discussions of *film noir*, with its emphasis on mystery, darkness, motivation and revelation. Indeed, the link between the *femme* and *noir* can be read as in many ways a tautological one: if a film has a *femme fatale*, it is a *film noir*, and in order to qualify as a *noir*, the *femme* is indispensable. Feminist work, particularly in the 1970s, on the *femme* as an operation of narrative identified a certain 'resistance' in the figure which has been picked up as a mode of feminist agency: the collection *Women in Film Noir*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan (1978, 1998) contained many essays which examined the *femme fatale* as narratively or textually 'contained' but culturally resonant and ideologically challenging, and available to be read 'against the grain'. This volume focused particularly on the female protagonists of a group of canonical *noirs*, such as Phyllis Dietrichson of *Double Indemnity* (Wilder 1944), Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Garnett 1946) and of course the eponymous protagonist of *Gilda* (Charles Vidor 1946). The attraction to feminist critics of the *femme* resides in the terminal ambiguity of her active sexuality, her narrative agency, her 'visual centrality' (Place 1998: 54) and, conversely, the problematic nature of this sexual 'power'; critics have decried her role as a textual fantasy, and interrogated the enduring stereotype of the sexually powerful woman as a 'symptom of male fears about feminism' (Doane 1991: 2–3).¹

However, critics have worked to challenge this overdetermination of the *femme fatale* as a *noir* icon, attempting to displace her from this position of centrality within the genre. Angela Martin noted the inability of *noir* critics to recognize female characters as performing other narrative functions than that of the *femme fatale* (Martin 1998); Richard Dyer looked for access to the interiority of *Gilda*, challenging the idea of her unknowability (Dyer 1998). Elisabeth Bronfen, meanwhile,

has argued that the process of reading the *femme fatale* in *film noir* as merely 'acted upon' replicates her visual fetishism and overlooks her tragic self-awareness.² The tendency to 'read the *femme fatale* either as an embodiment of threat or as a textual enigma' overlooks her agency and 'tragic sensibility'. It is also worth noting that the privileging of *noir* as the location of the *femme* overlooks the range of ambiguous and tough female characters in crime film and 'drama' in Hollywood of the 1940s and their cross-gendered appeal. Retrospective critical constructions of *noir* as a male genre do not correspond to the historical and industrial reality of the 1940s (see Hanson 2007: 1–32).

The *femme fatale* is a category as durable, malleable and resistant to definition as *noir* itself: both terms inevitably evoke more than they describe. In a desire to reach beyond *film noir* and Hollywood, and to avoid replicating the linkage between the *femme fatale* and *film noir*, the emphasis in this volume is on tracing the roots of the *femme fatale* figure across cultures and periods, and on restoring much-needed context by exploring the transnational and historical origins and intertexts out of which this complex feminine archetype has arisen. Each manifestation of the *femme fatale* has to be studied in relation to its local context and history, as well as in relation to the ways it may have absorbed other traditions of representation.

Although the idea of the *femme fatale* is 'as old as Eve', or indeed as old as Lilith, Adam's first wife, turned demon and succubus,³ the *femme fatale*, at least in Western literature and art, 'is only formulated as a clear and recognizable "type" in the late nineteenth century' (Stott 1992: ix). Across the field of production of European decadentism and symbolism, in the visual arts and literature representations of fatal women drawing upon the archetypes of religion and myth – Judith, Delilah, Lilith, Salome, Circe, Medusa – proliferated.

However, Stott argues for the rootedness of the *femme fatale* in a British *fin-de-siècle* marked by anxieties over women's emancipation, and an interest in the punitive classification of female sexuality, a project, she argues, that is congruent with the contemporary imperialist mapping of the unknown. Ultimately, the *femme fatale* is 'a sign, a figure who crosses discourse boundaries, who is to be found at the intersection of Western racial, sexual and imperial anxieties' (Stott 1992: 30). Thus the *femme fatale* marks the borders of race and sex, and her 'darkness' is the perfect trope of both her illegibility and unknowability, and of the threat of miscegenation and 'male fears of an engulfing femininity' (Huysen 1986: 52–3).⁴ Figures in artworks such as Salome, Rider Haggard's *She*, and Bram Stoker's female vampires bear out for Stott the

extent to which the *femme fatale* is emblem not just of Otherness, but of 'chaos, darkness, death, all that lies beyond the safe, the known, and the normal' (Stott 1992: 37).

In symptomatic readings of the *fin-de-siècle femme*, she also operates as a figure uniting concerns about social class and economic mobility. The body of the woman becomes a trope of capitalist modernity, and Dijkstra reads the vampire figure as addressing these concerns: 'by 1900 the vampire had come to represent woman as the personification of everything negative that linked sex, ownership and money' (1986: 351).⁵ When the woman enters the public sphere she becomes currency; hence the increasing slippage from the nineteenth century onwards between the figures of the actress, the prostitute and the *femme fatale*.⁶ Doane points to this slippage between the female *flâneur* wandering through the urban space of Paris and the prostitute: both represent 'sexuality out of bounds precisely as a result of woman's revised relation to space' (1991: 263). Andreas Huyssen goes further, by arguing that *fin-de-siècle* discourse obsessively genders mass culture itself as feminine and castrating (Huyssen 1986: 47): within that context the *femme fatale's* association with 'new technologies of production and reproduction' (Doane 1991: 1), which include the cinema, mediate how the relationship between women and modernity is imagined.

In putting together this collection we have been particularly interested in how the collected perspectives on the *femme fatale* allow us to trace movements between archetypal representations and more local specificities. Essays in the collection explore the cultural and historical specificity of the *femme fatale* figure in context, as well as how particular media and art forms imagine and disseminate the figure. Rather than trying to resolve the multiple definitions or terminological disputes over the classification of the *femme fatale* figure, the essays in the collection make a virtue of the proliferation and diversity of fatal female figures. Analyses encompass Eve, the Sirens, Salome, Mata Hari, Vamps, Divas, La Dolente, La Malinche, ruthless women, and 'good-bad girls'.

The volume begins with Griselda Pollock's injunction: 'Ecoutez la Femme'. In instructing us to listen to the *femme fatale*, she moves away from the fixity of visual representations to explore the role of the acoustic imaginary and the dangerous allure of the female voice. Her essay analyses how both the visual arts and the cinematic imagine and offer constructions of the feminine, suggesting that the sonic realm can offer new ways of thinking of female subjectivity and identity.

The collection is subsequently organized into sections, so that essays grouped together speak to each other. Section One, on literary and

visual archetypes, opens with Karen Edwards addressing Eve as one of the originary fatal female figures, but through her close reading of Genesis she restores an important and neglected aspect to Eve, showing that her vitality is as evident as her fatality. Ranging from the visual arts movements of symbolism and decadentism to early cinema, Jess Sully's essay traces incarnations of Salome, showing how these figures intertwine tradition and modernity, femininity and androgyny. Joy Ramirez then locates the emergence of the diva figure within Italian silent cinema, drawing attention to the ways in which the diva embodied both formal and cultural contradictions in the influential diva films, which navigated anxieties about modernity and change. Rosie White's essay on Mata Hari also addresses these tensions around femininity and modernity, exploring a case study in myth-making: Mata Hari. She investigates the exaggeration of Mata Hari's activities as a spy and the fabrication of her identity as an exotic figure.

The essays in Section Two all focus in different ways on how the meanings and performances of stars interact with figurations of the *femme fatale* in specific film-making contexts. Through close formal analysis of *mise-en-scène*, framing and performance Susan Hayward explores how Simone Signoret can be read as a 'queer femme' in Henri Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* (1955). Melanie Bell's contextual analysis of fatal femininity in British post-war cinema offers fresh perspectives on stars (Greta Gynt), archetypes (female poisoners) and blended genres (the interaction between the crime and gothic films in Britain), all of which interestingly modify the image of the *femme fatale*. Olga Kourelou's focus is on the politics of transnational stardom. She shows how Zhang Ziyi's formation as a global star involves a crystallization of female archetypes from different genres and with distinct meanings. Kourelou argues that the way in which these are held together within Zhang Ziyi's star image reveals the tensions between the global circulation of genres and culturally specific contexts. Catherine O'Rawe's essay also addresses transnational cultural and critical transmissions, this time between European and Hollywood cinema: she analyses the ways in which 'the national' has been a key concept in critical constructions of Italian neorealism, while the presence of the *femme fatale* in a number of neorealist films evidences the influence of Hollywood cinema. O'Rawe's analysis of the gendered star dynamics of Clara Calamai and Massimo Girotti in *Ossessione*, and Silvana Mangano and American star Doris Dowling in *Riso amaro*, reveals new and 'different national and cultural ways of knowing' the *femme fatale*, and points up the critical boundaries of neorealism and *film noir*.

Section Three includes essays which map the presence and use of the *femme fatale* in Spanish, Italian and Mexican cinema. Ann Davies argues that in Spanish 'retro noir' the *femme fatale*'s resistance to patriarchal oppression has a wider political meaning as a repudiation of Francoist values. Mary Wood's essay, meanwhile, concentrates on the specificities of 'la dolente', the Italian *femme fatale*, a figure of suffering which modifies American *film noir* conventions to fit an Italian context. Wood notes how Italian *film noir* exposes social problems and works through political realities. She maps the 'mutations' of the *femme fatale* in a period which spans the initial influence of American *noir* in the 1940s through to the contemporary period, showing how the figure 'metaphorize[s] existing social and political relations'. Marcie Rinka's and John Marambio's essay explores an oppositional paradigm between iconic figures in Mexican culture, the Virgin of Guadalupe and La Malinche, a figure with an ambivalent cultural heritage, considered as a betrayer by some people and by others a figure unifying Spanish and Aztec cultures. Rinka and Marambio discuss how films such as *Doña Barbara* (Fernando de Fuentes 1943) exploited these ambiguities and succeeded in reworking the *femme fatale* to speak to a Latin American context.

The focus of Section Four is Hollywood cinema. Steve Neale convincingly shows that the way in which *femme fatale* figures are accessed by viewers is dependent on the mode of narration. By contrasting Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder 1944) with Vicki (Gloria Grahame) in *Human Desire* Neale shows that character traits attributed to *femmes fatales* are conditioned by the extent to which knowledge of character motivation is communicated to or withheld from the viewer. Thus Neale offers a flexible and nuanced approach, which can account for the differences in a range of film characterizations. Julie Grossman argues that the strong cultural 'ideation' of the fatal woman has often distorted readings of women in *film noir*. She re-reads a range of independent female characters in 1940s American *film noir*, focusing on their qualities of ambition as a way to move out of an 'interpretive dead-end'. Finally, Helen Hanson's essay traces an overview of the currency of the American *femme fatale* in feminist film criticism. She notes the shifts in that currency and traces the place and value of the *femme fatale* as a complex body of ideas.

To take another example of critical gender trouble, Shoshana Felman, in her seminal 1977 article on the critical debates over Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, debates which raged over the madness or otherwise of the female protagonist, and her reliability, observed how 'pronouncements from the various sides of the controversy [...] repeat

unwittingly – with spectacular regularity – all the main lexical motifs of the text' (Felman 2007: 19). Identifying the ways in which criticism on the novel responded to the 'scandal' of its psychoanalytic readings, and tracing the specular relationship between the textual tropes of violence, madness, scandal, the uncanny and unreality, and its learned readers, she noted how 'the critical debate participates in and reproduces the terms of the text itself', and how the critical language itself became a type of textual madness.

Although we do not wish to make similar claims for the body of criticism on the *femme fatale*, there are, nevertheless, some striking congruences. It is true that we inevitably approach the *femme fatale* through the critical inheritance we have of her (Hanson demonstrates, in historicizing the reception of the cinematic *femme fatale*, how different critical issues have been at stake at different moments of her reception for different groups).⁷ But critical fascination with the myth of the *femme fatale*, whether with her ontological status, with her 'generative potency', to quote Felman on James (Felman 2007: 17), or with the possibility of her redemption in the demonstration by the alert critic of her symptomatic function in rupturing patriarchal structures, is, above all, a constant return to the *femme*, a manifestation of an endlessly unfulfilled desire. We, as critics, feel that something powerful is at stake here, manifested in the twin critical motifs of 'finding' the *femme fatale* in the text (in the sense of locating her within a representational history of fatal women) and of 'saving' her from the 'scandal' of her critical misinterpretation. In this collection we do not seek to arrive at a 'true' version of the *femme fatale*, but rather to recognize the ways in which our critical language rehearses, productively and uneasily, the tropes of the *femme* herself.

Notes

1. See Bronfen on the 'critical prejudice which, by treating [the *femme fatale*] as a symptom of masculine anxieties and not as a subject of feminine desire, allows us as critics to avoid the tragic message she relentlessly embodies' (Bronfen 2004: 115).
2. 'Yet the problem with reading the *femme fatale* as a stereotype of feminine evil, as a symptom of male anxiety, or as a catchphrase for the danger of sexual difference is that it treats this tragic feminine heroine as an encoded figure who exists only as the phantasmic emanation of others, who is acted upon and, when necessary, extinguished, rather than treating her as a separate subject who has agency and is responsible for her decisions. In so doing, feminist critics unwittingly imitate precisely the gesture of fetishism performed by Walter Neff at the very beginning of *Double Indemnity*, when he

- fixes his gaze on the golden bracelet Phyllis Dietrichson is wearing around her ankle, rather than acknowledging her as a separate human being' (Bronfen 2004: 114).
3. On the Romantic recuperation of Lilith by artists such as Rossetti, see Bullen (1999).
 4. See Gilman (1985: 30) on Mérimée's *Carmen* (1845) as the quintessential Other: female, black, a gypsy, proletarian.
 5. See also Evans (2003: 129).
 6. Work by nineteenth-century positivist criminologists such as the Italian Cesare Lombroso linked femininity, deception, performance and prostitution. See Dalle Vacche (2008: 131).
 7. In this way we are always obliged to perform a 'reading of the text that will at the same time be articulated with a reading of its readings' (Felman 2007: 22).

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1

Ecoutez la *Femme*: Hear/Here Difference

Griselda Pollock



Illustration 1 Image of Herbert Draper's 'Ulysses and the Sirens' from Bridgeman Art Gallery.

Credit: Ulysses and the Sirens, 1910 (oil on canvas) by Draper, Herbert James (1864–1920).

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The Sirens appear in Book XII of Homer's *Odyssey*. After returning from the underworld, Odysseus and his men are received by Circe, luring the men back to pure animality, but she turns helper, and prepares them for the next stage of their homeward journey. She warns them of several dangers ahead, one of which is the Sirens, who

spellbind any man alive, whoever comes their way. Whoever draws too close, off guard, and catches the Sirens' voices in the air – no sailing home for him, no wife rising to meet him, no happy children beaming up at their father's face. The high thrilling song of the Sirens will transfix him, lolling in their meadow, round them heaps of corpses rotting away, rags of skin shrivelling on their bones. (Homer, *Odyssey*, Book XII, 48–57)

Although complex in their origins as singing sea nymphs or hairless bird-women hybrids, with etymological associations with bees (hence their honeyed voices), the Sirens, always plural, introduce into the imaginary of western culture a radical alterity that binds the feminine, as what is excessive to social order, and hence linked with the non-human but also the prehuman/prehistoric, with nature, material and imaginative domination of which alone produces the identity between the social, the cultural and the masculine. If the Sirens represent otherness to Man, the danger attributed to the allure of that otherness consolidates a particular construction of the human subject as he who can resist their dangerous seduction. Thus the *human* subject is produced firstly in terms of gender, that is, in the masculine, but also in terms of a historically specific mode of a widespread socio-political-economic system: heterosexual patriarchy. For the temporarily wandering man (the *Odyssey* as allegory of the nobody – Odysseus's name can also mean 'nobody' – undertaking the ordeal of his own re-formation, rediscovery), who listens to the Sirens' song, there is no return to/or arrival at the *oikos*, home, no return to or arrival at his varied servants and dependents, no mirroring back through women and children of *his* consolidated subject position signified by the terms/positions of husband, father, proprietor and overlord. Thus the Sirens' song and the words they sing offer something radically dangerous, beyond pleasure, suspending time, without labour, which the subject created in resistance to them considers *jouissance*, and, hence, death. It is experienced as a kind of going back, rather than going home to the proper place of the proper man. The lure of the Sirens can be translated into the fatal woman precisely when *jouissance* is linked to death and identified with