



universität
wien

DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit

„Bridal G(l)ory
Constructions and Representations of the Mad Bride“

Verfasserin

Anna-Christina Leitner

angestrebter akademischer Grad

Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, 2012

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:
Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt:
Betreuerin:

A 343
Anglistik und Amerikanistik
ao. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Monika Seidl

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. Monika Seidl for her advice and encouragement, as well as my family for their support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction – 1

1. Issues of Identity – 11

1.1. “[For my wedding] I wanted to look like myself”: The Humanist Subject – 11

1.2. Ways of Reading Identity as Constructed, Fragmented, Ambiguous – 14

1.3. Neither Subject nor Object: The Abject in Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* – 16

2. The Bride as Fluid Identity? Clean, Mannered Bodies and Pristine, White Dresses – 24

3. Lifting the Veil: Deconstructing Bride – 27

3.1. “[...] she stood lost in eternity wearing a crazy dress, watching the immense sky.” The Sublime Terror of the Gory Gown – 30

3.2. Becoming Brides – 34

4. Madness as Cultural Construction – 44

5. The Mad Bride as Unruly Transgressor of Boundaries – 48

6. Kristeva’s Abject Revisited – 57

6.1. Excess: Spilling Over – 57

6.2. Materiality as the First Site of Abjection – 58

6.3. Essentialism, Maternity, Controversy – 59

6.4. Transgressions: “[...] abjection is above all ambiguity” – 62

7. “No matter how many white veils you put on, honey”: Reading Brenda Chenoweth as Mad Bride – 65

8. Conclusion and Outlook – 109

9. References – 113

9.1. Bibliography – 113

9.2. Filmography – 121

9.3. Figures – 122

10. Appendix – 124

Introduction

When Anna Nicole Smith (deceased in 2007) surprisingly married J. Howard Marshall II on 27 June 1994, the wedding received immense press coverage and produced pronounced outrage, both fascination and repulsion, among the public. *People* magazine reported the union as follows:

The bride wore cleavage. The 89-year-old groom, speaking from his wheelchair, assured the 11 people in attendance that he sure did adore his new 26-year-old wife, for whom he already had purchased \$ 1 million worth of jewelry. After the champagne-and-chocolate-cake reception, the bride kissed her man and whispered, 'Bye darling, I'm off to Greece'. Thus was Anna Nicole Smith, big-boned Guess jeans model, *Playboy* Playmate of the Year (1993) and actress (*Naked Gun 33 1/3*), joined in holy matrimony with fellow Texan J. Howard Marshall II, a Houston oilman believed to be worth about \$ 500 million. (*People*, 1 August 1994 73, qtd. in Brown 88-89)

Anna Nicole Smith's immense popularity of the early 1990s came to a rather abrupt halt with the above reported marriage, which in the aftermath induced heavy scrutiny of her bodily assets and her sexuality (Ferris and Pitcher 8). Significantly, it is Smith's emergence as a *bride* that not only affected her audience on an incomparably large scale, but also resulted in public scorn and ridicule that came to characterise most of her subsequent career. We may wonder why exactly it should be the construction of Smith as *bride* that is so decisively disrupting her public image, which had thitherto been received widely positively – despite Smith's 'white trash' background and her affiliations to pornography. Why exactly was it her marriage that made Smith's popularity that short-lived (Ferris and Pitcher 8) and assigned to her the label of the culturally abject?

The article perhaps bears some indication of matters relevant to an analysis of the *mad bride*, the type of femininity this paper is devoted to explore. In a nutshell, the insights that can be gained in these short lines boil down to the notion of *excess*. Excess in this context denotes not only the notion of 'too much of the same' (surely the public persona of Anna Nicole Smith will be most readily associated with the notion of excess as 'lack of restraint'), but also means – and this meaning is in the context of this paper of somewhat greater interest – the *combination of what should be separate*. For my purposes, the notion of excess mostly concerns the indulging in an abject position of 'both/and', rather than the socially sanctioned 'either/or'. As will be argued, this kind of semantic overdetermination inevitably results in an unruly intersection of domains, in continuity as well as in the breaching of boundaries.

At first sight, this bridal couple is characterised by dichotomies, polarities, difference. Dualistically conceptualised, the above quoted snippet establishes the binary pair bride and groom as the two referential points framing the wedding spectacle, while one side of this dichotomy, the bride, undoubtedly is exposed as occupying a most excessive and licentious position. The construction of Anna Nicole Smith's various excesses, which is largely achieved via the employment of binaries, undoubtedly forms the major objective of this article. Dwelling on a dualistic logic that profoundly structures the Western ways of thinking, the article makes every effort to show us how different these two people are: while she is young, he is old, while she is trailer-park white trash, he is a millionaire. What they share is their Texan background – but revealed as a take-the-money-and-runaway bride, Anna Nicole is depicted as rather heading off to Greece, as if to defy their common roots, as if to hit home the message that feeds on binary oppositions: among other polarities, she is *mobile*, whereas he is *confined* to his wheelchair¹ It seems that mobility is what Anna Nicole is best at – seemingly effortlessly she is hopping from stripper to model, to Playmate, to actress, to bride, and off to Greece.

It is this plurality and hybridity of positions Anna Nicole adopts that is her default – this and that she does so in a manner that appears too effortless, too flimsy – always in motion, she is just too difficult to be pinned down. Marshall might be ridiculously senile, but at least he is respectably solid in his identity: a rich oilman safely confined to his wheelchair. Contrastingly, Smith's mobility as regards her identity is all the more unruly when she is adopting the role of the bride, a figure that comes with very specific conventions, and exacting standards, all of which, due to her excessiveness, Smith defies. One level of her excess concerns her enormous corporeality that dangerously points towards monstrosity. Her unruly big body simultaneously displays traits of hyper-femininity (cleavage) and masculinity (big-boned). The enormity of her breasts draws attention to Smith's reproductive power and her per se abjectly leaking, and potentially lactating state; her largeness is further juxtaposed by ambivalently contrasting it with her young age and girlish whispering².

¹ Obviously, this is a disruption of the conventional pairing male/active, female/passive.

² This pairing of the markers 'girlish' and 'enormous' is a technique conventionally applied in freak shows' representations of fat ladies, such as Dolly Dimples or Winsome Winnie, whose excessive corporeality was ridiculed and stressed by employing contrastive girlish props, such as frills and jewels (Thomson 10). Notably, in her reality TV show, *The Anna Nicole Smith Show*, Smith, whose appearance had changed by then due to a quite obvious weight gain, frequently stylised herself in this way. In this example, dress provides the means to draw

This corporeal excessiveness (both ‘too much of the same’, and ‘joining what should be separate’) can be said to mirror her subject position. While the article makes an effort to establish *difference* between the bride and groom, to *separate* their embodied realms, it also hints at, perhaps involuntarily, opposing realms being *unified* within the bride’s body. On the surface, the article seems to argue that Smith and Marshall’s union is unholy because of their incompatibility, their originating from apparently dichotomous worlds. However, the greater threat to the cultural status quo, what troubles hegemonic Western order from within, arguably does not concern difference, but *continuity* and *sameness*. More specifically put, Anna Nicole’s amorality seems to largely stem from her transgressions of boundaries and her defiance to stay within the realms that are supposed to be ‘naturally’ inscribed in her. She displays an eagerness for upward social mobility that is more acceptable with masculinity: despite working class origin, she intrudes into the prosperous elite, despite her former career as a Playmate and stripper (the metaphorically dirty), she replaces Claudia Schiffer in the prestigious *Guess* jeans advertisement campaign (the metaphorically clean) – notably she does so while still being marked ‘+working class’.

Displaying a certain overabundance in the positions she embodies, the bride sets out to unify within her body and her identity what should be separate, and to turn conventional binaries upside down. Consequently, she threatens to dissolve seemingly stable dividing lines and embodies the danger and uncertainty of cultural mobility (Russo 133). Importantly, this danger involves the collapse of some apparent polarities embodied by Marshall and Smith, and implies that Smith is on the verge of acquiring the same economic power Marshall has got. Thus, the supposedly separate figures of Smith and Marshall are aligned by a troubling continuity, a threat of sameness that makes a clear-cut separation impossible. Due to Smith’s ontological excessiveness, she comes to embody an identity that seems to be constantly spilling over (sexually voracious, corporeally and morally incontinent) and ever teetering on the brink of social condemnation. This fluid identity is juxtaposed by the article’s tight

the line between social appropriateness and the violation of bridal decorum: “[...] social pressure encourages us to stay within the bounds of what is defined in a situation as “normal” body and “appropriate” dress” (Entwistle 338). The opening reference to her dress (“The bride wore cleavage”) mockingly mimics the laboriously detailed newspaper accounts on weddings fashionable around the beginning of the twentieth century and serves as a marker of Smith’s unruly identity. Not going into detail about the wedding dress at all, but exclusively dwelling on Smith wearing cleavage (combined with the emphasis on the high amount of money her spouse has spent on jewellery) indicates that the bridal attire flouts the conventions and does not fit within the claustrophobically narrow frame of choices available – for bridal dress and identity.

structure and apparent love of numbers that may hint towards the article's (and Western culture's) desire to categorise Smith.

Even though the wedding is ridiculed as grotesquely absurd, the article makes sure that the roles (female/male, young/old, wealthy elite/white trash) within the specific spectacle of the wedding are recognisable and, most importantly, separate. After all, the article – as is the white wedding – is a product of a “[...] society that values boundaries over continuity and separateness over sameness” (Creed 29). Still, we may wonder which subject position Anna Nicole assumes in this particular setting: is she a ‘bride’, as which she is designated twice, or a ‘wife’, which she is referred to once, or both? Is she still a bride when she is on her solitary ‘honeymoon’ in Greece? To which extent are these roles still valid, given that this spectacle is far from the holy matrimony it conventionally should be? It is probably in the midst of these questions, in this field of ambiguity and liminality that we can find a starting point for the subsequent thesis, as well as a (tentative) answer to my initial question: why is it the emergence of Anna Nicole Smith as *bride* that makes her a cultural abject, a modern freak, a monstrous, grotesque female?

Acknowledging that the Western white wedding is a “[...] moment in which people are invited to position themselves as cultural beings, to place themselves within the performance of culture in ways that involve placing themselves within [...] discursive (and therefore bodily, sexualised and racialized) boundaries” (Bell 464-5), it is obvious that it is also a moment in which violations of these positions and boundaries become highly visible. It is in this particular moment of the Western white wedding, in her emergence as bride, that Anna Nicole Smith is exposed as troubling and transgressing boundaries within dichotomies (white trash/ elite, dirty/clean, masculine/feminine). Arguably, these transgressions are all the more unruly when performed by a bride, as the visibility of said boundaries is heightened in the spectacle of the white wedding. In the context of this paper, Anna Nicole is a ‘mad’ bride, a bride that breaches standards of feminine identity, agency and beauty. To be sure, she does not exactly “[...] ‘go[...] mad’ in white satin [...]” (Hughes 167), in the sense that she might be called pathologically insane. However, what the construction of Smith as bride shares with that of a variety of fictitious characters ‘going mad’ in white is a particular form of excess: these ‘mad brides’ join what should be separate and consequently are marked both ‘+A’ and ‘+B’. Realms which should not be touched are intruded, unthinkable in-between states are

taken, semantic determinations turn out as overabundant and ambiguous – and it is this position of uncertainty, of redundancy and excess that makes Smith, and many other brides, ‘mad’.

What seems like a paragon of docile, passive femininity, might be pervasively renegotiated via the model of the *mad* bride. In stark contrast to conventional readings of the objectified bride³, the mad bride is by no means “[...] defined, reduced even, to the story of her wedding day” (Anderson 106), which, in turn, is “[...] planned and executed to exacting standards [...]” (Anderson 106). As an unruly transgressor of conventionally established boundaries and ‘exacting standards’, the model of the mad bride should prove powerful in rewriting the notion of bride, particularly in regard to issues of feminine identity, agency, aesthetics, as well as discourses of romantic (hetero-normative) relationships. Also, standards of the female body and dress as contained and constrained, rather than free and open might be reassessed via the counter-hegemonic model of the mad bride.

This paper draws much of its inspiration from Clair Hughes’ chapter “The Missing Wedding Dresses: Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* to Anita Brookner’s *Hôtel du Lac*” (*Dressed in Fiction*), in which she comments on the well-established stereotype of brides going mad in white satin. She mentions Miss Havisham, ambiguously hovering “[...] between the states of daughter and wife” (Hughes 167) as well as virgin and crone, Lucy Ashton, breaching the boundary between human and animal (after severely wounding Bucklaw, she is found “[...] couched like a hare upon its form – her head-gear dishevelled; her night-clothes torn and dabbled with blood, – her eyes glazed, and her features convulsed into a wild paroxysm of insanity” (Scott 105)) and Bertha Rochester, who similarly troubles an easy identification as either human or animal (“[...] whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell [...]” (Brontë 293)). As will be argued in greater detail in chapters 3 and 4, respectively, neither the designation as ‘bride’, nor as ‘mad’ is unambiguous, but fraught with gaps, inconsistencies and fissures that lend themselves to deconstructive readings. These readings

³ Lévi-Strauss highlights the English phrase ‘to give away the bride’ and the Germanic ‘gift’ as both ‘present’ and ‘engagement’ (122) that resonates in German ‘Mitgift’ (dowry) suggesting the bride is an intrinsic part of economic exchange and thus firmly inscribed into given power relations of patriarchy (Lévi-Strauss 124). In this reading, which is developed further by Gayle Rubin, ‘bride’ appears hopelessly powerless, and ultimately frozen in her position within the all-encompassing structures of male interchange. Also wedding photographs conventionally construct power relations of gender as unbalanced: “[...] women are portrayed as submissive or less empowered than men, and men are depicted in power poses” (Lewis 176).

are determined to tackle and consequently rewrite seemingly fixed tales of certain types of femininity. By severely questioning the validity of the signifiers ‘bride’ and ‘mad’, we will also realise that what aligns these mad brides is not some inherent, common core of ‘bridal madness’, but rather concerns the versatile transgression or dilution of boundaries within dichotomies, the embodiment of *both* polarities A *and* B forming a given binary pair, say, human *and* animal, which creates a position of excess. Accordingly, the model of the mad bride, which is proposed in chapter 5, will attempt a renegotiation of conventionally established hierarchies within binary oppositions A/B (organic/inorganic, subject/object, animate/inanimate, human/animal, young/old etc.).

The introductory example of Anna Nicole Smith as mad bride has left us with already too much to say at this point. There have been allusions to the female body (and dress) as ideal/contained and monstrous/open, to attraction and repulsion, the fluidity of ‘bride’, varieties of excess, troubled identity, economic dependencies and power, convergence and conflict of social class, the outward displays of circulation that the patriarchal wedding ceremony is widely held to be (Bell 464), and the employment of binary oppositions that brings about these aspects. We can see that the field in which the mad bride is located is highly complex and informed by a wide variety of discourses – a discussion of this type of femininity and its accompanying subtexts therefore invariably demands a sharp theoretical focus. By applying Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject, this paper finds an apt framework for elucidating the ways in which identity and subject positions of bridal figures can be considered ambiguous and unstable. The guiding hypothesis for reading transgressions of body, dress and identity (i.e. the ambiguous and unruly embodiment of both A and B) is that these excessive transgressions have to manifest themselves in abject materiality, most frequently in the gory bridal dress⁴.

Just as Anna Nicole Smith transgresses seemingly stable boundaries⁵, just as she engages in innovative ways of rethinking boundaries as a means of identification, and just as

⁴ This aspect is not particularly pronounced in the introductory example of Anna Nicole Smith, but will play a paramount role in this paper’s practical analysis of *Six Feet Under*’s Brenda Chenoweth as mad bride.

⁵ In this example, Smith is ambiguously aligned to both ‘low’ (dirty) and ‘high’ (clean) forms of female representation. In subsequent examples, this ambiguity will concern more fundamental, ontological states, such as the abject in-between positions of embodying both human and animal, male and female, animate and inanimate traits.

she “[...] disturbs identity, system, order” and “[...] does not respect borders, positions and rules” but rather is aligned to “[t]he in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4)⁶, this thesis seizes boundaries only to undo them, and thus attempts to renegotiate the boundaries of bridal identity. In Julia Kristeva’s account, what is deemed abject is basically located in an intermediary position – Rosalind Krauss observes that because it is impossible to differentiate the abject in terms of its substance, it describes “[...] a subject position that seems to cancel the very subject it is operating to locate [...]” (92). Thus, the theory of the abject may indicate a way to foreground the basic instability and permeability of a subject and its position, and therefore provide the means to tackle and severely trouble the humanist conception of the (bridal) subject as authentic, autonomous and invariably stable (for a sketch of the humanist subject see 1.1.).

To sum up, this paper engages with constructions and representations of the mad bride – a bridal figure taking a subject position of ambiguity, uncertainty and excess – and sets out to investigate abject materialisations of such subject positions. There is a veritable tradition of ‘abject criticism’ – numerous essays and books using Kristeva’s theory of the abject as their methodological approach for reading cultural representations of women, have been published. Mostly, these works (for a short, but quite representative list see Tyler 82), set out to “[...] explore, challenge and, in some instances, ‘reclaim’ misogynistic depictions of woman as abject” (Tyler 82), hoping to displace “[...] disciplinary norms that frame dominant representations of gender” (Tyler 82). The figure of the bride, however, is not usually examined for her disruptive agency manifesting in abject materiality: I am aware of one essay by Vikki Bell (published in 1998, thus slightly after the most fruitful days of abject criticism; also, she does not explicitly employ the theory of the abject), and the quite recent work of Michele White, which examines the phenomenon of the Trash the Dress movement and its ambivalent engagements in cultural conceptions of the bridal body as clean and mannered. This relatively small amount of criticism devoted to the bride as abject⁷ must be puzzling, given that depictions of brides as uncanny, abject, or, as in the definition proposed in this paper, ‘mad’, circulate widely in numerous cultural texts. As has been indicated, the figure of

⁶ References to Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror. An Essay of Abjection* will henceforth be quoted as ‘Kristeva’.

⁷ Hagar Salamon and Esther Juhasz’s analysis of the fattening of Jewish brides in Tunisia touches upon the ambivalence of the grotesque bridal body (both attractive and repulsive), but focuses more on the mechanisms of bodily control and the disempowerment of these brides.

the bride seems a most intriguing and promising field for investigation as she is positioned at a most critical moment of Western culture, the white wedding. This ritual asks for the reaffirmation of a variety of cultural boundaries – as will be demonstrated, the mad bride can be read as offering a position of resistance and defiance to this imperative. Therefore, it is all the more curious that the disruptive potential of the mad bride’s abject corporeality and identity and their implications on hetero-normative standards should be so rarely discussed within academia. In any case, this thesis is determined to be a first step in filling this gap, as it sets out to explore and activate the potential of the mad bride and her capacity to disrupt the ubiquitous story of the Western white wedding from within, as well as to suggest alternative, creative and, perhaps, liberating and empowering ways of thinking bridal and, in extension, feminine identity.

Let me say a few words on the example chosen for practical analysis: Clair Hughes roots her observations about mad brides in a discussion of canonical novels (*Great Expectations*, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Woman in White*). While I take her chapter as an invaluable starting point for a definition of the mad bride, in particular via exposing the inconsistencies of the constructed categories ‘bride’ and ‘mad’, I do not intend to restrict my analysis to the examples given by Hughes. On the contrary, I see it as enriching the discourse ‘mad bride’ to include examples of contemporary popular culture, as in doing so we might find out how far the model can be stretched, as well as explore and make sense of the ubiquity of this type of femininity in our culture.⁸ The “[...] least privileged modes of writing, the texts produced by the entertainment industry” (Belsey 10), such as serial television (a medium particularly prone to being patronised and viewed with disdain (Lawson xxi)), certainly are replete with brides and white weddings. Television quite frequently features the stock character of the monstrosly obsessive wedding planner, bridezilla, and it is perhaps almost notorious in portraying thwarted brides and troubled weddings – we might even imagine abject matter to play its grotesquely comical part in one or two of these weddings gone wrong.

⁸ That being said, the brides mentioned by Clair Hughes, Bertha Rochester in particular, have been discussed extensively elsewhere, whereas there is a “[...] surprising dearth of critical material” (Heywood 189) on *Six Feet Under*, the source of my main example.

However, while these topoi certainly reverberate strongly in many texts featuring mad brides, I am obviously interested in a quite specific, non-compliant type of femininity, thus in bridal characters that flesh out the concept ‘mad bride’ rudimentarily sketched out above. We may encounter these characters in a variety of texts: novels, opera, fashion shows, advertisement, films, and constructions of star celebrities such as Anna Nicole Smith. While all these forms will find their way into my thesis, I have chosen to put my practical emphasis on the TV series *Six Feet Under*, a hybrid in generic terms (Akass and McCabe 2), which is well-known for not shying at abject matter and thus engaging in a seemingly “[...] non-commercial branding” (Lavery 23). Dealing with death and other cultural taboos, its narrative is located in liminal and transitional spheres (Akass and McCabe 10). Indeed, Rob Turnock argues that “[...] each *Six Feet Under* episode offers a liminal space for exploring socially and culturally problematic themes and taboo subjects [...]” (40).

For ‘A Coat of White Primer’, the episode serving as this paper’s main example, this view seems valid. Two discourses of liminality and transformation clash: a miscarriage represents a taboo-laden space where the boundary separating life and death collapses, and the spectacle of the wedding is a “[...] moment in which certain cultural awarenesses and identifications are crystallised and anxiously ritualised” (Bell 464). This dangerous field of liminality and transformation is exactly where this thesis sees most potential for disrupting conventional confinements of the patriarchally preconceived notion of ‘bride’ – and it is also this field in which the abject is located (see 1.3.). As has been indicated above, this paper will try to argue that a bride’s madness, i.e. her ambiguous subject position, surfaces, or threatens to surface, in the abject deformation of her body and dress. Accordingly, the reading of Brenda Chenoweth as mad bride in ‘A Coat of White Primer’ (see section 7) will spot and discuss abject manifestations of her excessive corporeality and identity and thereby trace a counter-discourse to hegemonic ideals of bridal identity, agency and body.

In the following section 1, the basic theoretical tenets enabling a definition of the mad bride shall be laid out. Embracing ambiguity, the deployment of this label is based on the acknowledgement of its incompleteness and constructedness. As chapters 3 and 4 hopefully illustrate, terms such as ‘mad’ and ‘bride’ cannot be considered closed categories – this openness is, of course, shared with the concepts ‘subject’ and ‘subject position’ within cultural studies. Thus, before a definition of the mad bride shall be sketched out in chapter 5,

a brief outline of the conception of identity as fluid, becoming, and constructed via language will be given. Even though these observations might appear most basic knowledge in the discipline and indeed seem almost redundant to rehearse, they perhaps have to be touched upon briefly in order to situate this paper's principal assumptions in a wider intellectual field.

Attempting to relate the notion of bride with the theoretical basics (and thus providing a focus necessary to such a wide theoretical background), I will discuss aspects of identity in a continuum that involves sketching out the Cartesian subject (1.1) in most rudimentary terms, followed by a specification along the deconstructive lines of multiplicity, ambiguity and fragmentation of the subject (1.2) that has come to stand as a powerful alternative against the concept of a somewhat stable and contained identity. Notions such as ambiguity and fragmentation will lead me to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, which in this paper serves as the most specific means for troubling humanist notions of an invariably fixed identity, and exposing it as multiple and fragmented instead. Thereby, the theory of the abject will be proposed as a promising lens for reading revamped conceptions of femininity, as well as tracing liberating notions of bridal identity (1.3). I am aware that these questions have been addressed numerous and intensely in the last two decades, also in connection to Kristeva's theory of the abject. However, the notion of bridal identity as being cracked open by subversive materiality has been, despite a wealth of primary material and prominent cultural circulation, widely ignored in secondary literature. Therefore, a theoretical discussion of issues concerning identity in connection with bride, should be justified.

The three-fold structure indicated above is a necessary abstraction of a complex and intertwined network of different, partly entangled discourses. Acknowledging a "[...] contemporary fascination with the decentered subject [...]" (4), Caroline Evans warns against ignoring the history and 'pedigree' of the sovereign self's disenfranchisement that started in the nineteenth century. Despite their smack of common sense, these theoretical concepts have continuing resonance as well as validity within cultural studies. Obviously, they have spawned an immense body of writing (not least because a vast number of theoretical approaches have come to value ambiguity as potentially disrupting seemingly fixed forms of (binary) categorisation (Gamble 129)), which is why this outline is necessarily incomplete and selectively touches only the most rudimentary points that are felt to be helpful in advancing my argument.

1. *Issues of Identity*

1.1. “[For my wedding] I wanted to look like myself”⁹: *The Humanist Subject*

In our culturally shared narrative a particularly tenacious and widely held conception of identity can be traced. We have come to believe in the popular notion of a self that is on the one hand true, universal and timeless. The concept of the ‘transcendent subject’ holds that the individual “[...] is antecedent to, or transcends, the forces of society, experience, and language” (Barry 18). On the other hand, identity is understood as having an essence (“individuality”) lying at its core that makes our identity widely recognisable and somewhat unique. Identity is thus perceived a set of characteristics, which, as valid entities we can ‘possess’ due to our individual autonomy, consciousness, will and reason – put together, these apparently coherent notions form the humanist ideal of the ‘unity of man’ (Becker-Leckrone 21).

In this Western repertoire of thought, identity is imagined as being endowed with fundamental authenticity and reliable coherence as well as striving “[...] onward and upward toward idealist perfection” (Becker-Leckrone 23) – thus, it is considerably invested with emotional, moral discourses. It can, however, be ‘lost’ or ‘hidden’ due to several reasons. Madness would be an example: being mad, the subject, in particular the young female, is frequently seen as being stripped of its original, human qualities and depicted as fragile, fragmented and out of control (Meyer, Fallah and Wood 217), thus the very opposite of the unmarked, sane subject. It is, however, possible to ‘find’ our inner self again: through guidance, the subject can be enabled to retake control. The subject which is not marked ‘mad’ is further understood to stem from the Cogito, the “[...] willful and conscious *presence* of the self to itself [...]” (Becker-Leckrone 24 emphasis in the original), and is based on the Cartesian principle ‘I think, therefore I am’, which is why it is also referred to as the Cartesian subject.

It is obvious that in our daily life we assume a variety of roles and it is widely acknowledged that in the course of our lifetime we will experience different situations to which we have to adapt – our inner ‘core’, however, is understood as basically consistent and

⁹ A ‘recent bride’ quoted in Foley.

stable, regardless of whichever circumstances. An example of such special circumstances would be the ritual of the wedding, in which the woman adopts the role of the bride. In women's accounts of this experience¹⁰, it is often pointed out to an authentic essence, which constitutes their identity and which they wish to preserve and communicate in the wedding ritual. The way to do so usually concerns the choice of a wedding dress that somehow mirrors the women's *true* self: the dress is seen as reflecting "[...] the tastes and values of the bride and is thus tied to her identity" (Otnes and Lowrey, see also Cotto). This is a truism that permeates most discourses about identity and epitomises the fundamental trust that each subject's uniqueness is observable in a relatively straight-forward way: "[...] identity is an essence signified through signs of taste, beliefs, attitudes and lifestyles" (Barker "Identity") and can be identified via these signs, or even *has* to be communicated in this way (Arnold 490).

Those tastes and values are indicators of a stable identity that obviously is perceived to exist prior to the selection of the wedding dress and that therefore can be reflected and expressed in the 'right' dress. This notion is perhaps most pronounced in the revelatory experience of *instinctively* knowing that this is *her* dress: most brides describe "[...] the selection of the wedding dress [as] an intense, hierophanous experience, during which the perfect selection seemed to be magically revealed to them" (Otnes and Lowrey). Thus, the dress as reflection of its wearer's identity is, with a somewhat providential certainty, considered preordained, authorised and given by a 'higher', indisputable and even mythical, indeed *magical* order. Not to choose a dress that reflects one's true self, is a probability that produces anxiety and unease: a woman identified as 'recent bride' in an article titled 'Finding the dress' is quoted "I remember going back to prom with my father looking at pictures of me in that dress, and saying, 'Who's that girl?' [For my wedding] I wanted to look like myself." (Foley).

The wearer of the dress not only is depicted in possession of a stable identity that is characterised by indisputable validity, but also has the competence to wilfully communicate how this identity works within given structures: "[...] the style of dress reflects the woman's personality, and her attitudes towards her body, sexuality, the wedding ritual, and marriage itself" (Harris Walsh 243). The incessant insistence on the subject's autonomy warrants a

¹⁰ Only a small selection of examples of such accounts shall be in this chapter.

model of identity that is endowed with the notion of the Cartesian cogito, a second-order consciousness (Dimovitz 9): “Within the conventions of wedding attire (if she chooses to adhere to these rules), the bride has complete freedom. She can decide on the length, neckline, bodice, train, etc., to suit her wishes” (Harris Walsh 243). In a classic narrative of interpellation, she not only has *complete freedom* within given norms, but she also can deliberately *choose* whether she wants to stay within a given system of meaning making. Evidently, the bride’s individualistic deviations are merely routinely stretches firmly engrained within the agreed-upon frame, and items promising to give a personal, unique and individual touch to the ritual ironically must appeal to “[...] what consumers have in common [...]” (Currie 417) – still, this discursive undercurrent has recently been allowed considerable ground to flourish in neoliberalist and post-feminist cultures that celebrate individualism. The respective ethos propagates an autonomous individualism that depicts individuals as free to manage themselves, which either is rewarded with success or exposed as failure (Ringrose and Walkerdine 227-229). The practical analysis of Brenda Chenoweth as mad bride in the *Six Feet Under* episode ‘A Coat of White Primer’ will touch upon this aspect, and in particular will negotiate the pressure that is created when the emergence as bride is to be ‘successful’, i.e. adhering to hetero-normative standards of feminine beauty and bridal decorum. Also the topos of ‘failure’ as connected to a somewhat stable essence of individuality (Brenda laments that her ardent desire to live up to these expectations has been “[...] a pathetic attempt to become something [she] is not”) will be discussed.

These introductory notes have tentatively demonstrated ways in which (bridal) identity is generally perceived. In many ways, this paper’s definition of the mad bride tries to trouble boundaries. The theoretical and analytical framework that constitutes this study shall, on a more general level, indicate ways of intervening in set-ups of identity as rigidly fixed. More specifically, this background shall provide the means to interfere in those interpretative routines that have perpetuated bridal identity as fixed and stable, and to offer alternatives that embrace ambiguity. In order to situate my study in a broader academic context, I very briefly lay out some cultural studies approaches that have sought to trouble identity as fixed.

1.2. *Ways of Reading Identity as Constructed, Fragmented, Ambiguous*

In a broad desire to turn away from humanist perspectives on the subject and identity, which were increasingly termed ‘essentialist’ in a shift of paradigm that set in during the 1990s, cultural studies established ‘identity’ as a central category demanding reconceptualization. In the course, various methodological stances and analytical tools were developed and successfully employed. In the subsequent paragraphs, some approaches to renegotiate identity outside the bounds of the humanist conventions shall be sketched out briefly. Bearing in mind the theoretical framework that is felt necessary for putting forth the subsequent argument, I have carefully assembled the approaches presented. This assembly should be a tentative reflection of the intellectual field within which this study is situated.

Social constructivism has come to analyse identity as culturally *constructed* and *contingent*, and to deliberately put a contrast to notions of the naturally given or preordained stable entity that have been outlined in 1.1.. More specifically, identity is seen as being discursively produced – this insight enables us to perceive identity merely as an emotionally charged description (Barker “Identity”) that is brought about within a particular system of meaning making and consequently naturalised into ontology. Within these systems it is, according to Saussure, the marking of *difference* that produces meaning in the first place. Obviously, this marking is most easily exercised by deploying *binary oppositions*. These binary oppositions, however, are exposed in deconstructionist moves to have a culturally constituted hierarchy at their core. Also here, the constructedness of such a hierarchical structure is stressed, rather than assumed that this order was self-evident or ‘true’ whatsoever.

The culturally produced bias inherent in binary oppositions has been argued to be quite pronounced in the article about Anna Nicole Smith’s wedding, which features one side as respectable, and the other as ‘unholy’. In an attempt to destabilise such hierarchies, the binaries themselves are exposed to be considerably less stable than structuralist analyses appear to convey. In poststructuralist approaches, this is done by acknowledging interchange, circulation and fluidity within language, as well as secret inversion and collapse of binaries, which consequently should “[...] strike a serious blow at certain traditional theories of meaning” (Eagleton 112), such as the structuralist premise that ‘meaning is a structure’ (Becker-Leckrone 21) and therefore can be confidently secured in a positivistic outlook.

A way to do so could be exposing the secret collapse of the difference between bride and bridegroom that language¹¹ allows: in the 15th and 16th centuries, ‘bride’ could refer to both sexes (OED, second edition 1989, online version June 2011). Linguistically speaking, this meaning may be obsolete now – but in cultural terms, its apparent obscurity gets lost more and more, as the impossibility of differentiation that ever lurks in the dichotomous pair becomes visible. Sidney Eve Matrix and Pauline Greenhill note that “[t]he norm is for brides to be female. However, in a world in which transgendered and transsexual folks rightly seek a place, the norm cannot be presumed” (6) and report weddings with, for instance, two female brides wearing white gowns and tiaras, or one female and one male groom.

Also the androgynous model Andrej Pejic made a widely received appearance in a Jean Paul Gaultier’s fashion show (Spring 2011), in which he presented the supposedly most prestigious piece of clothing: the wedding dress. He also was featured as bride on the cover of *Out* magazine in November 2011. Thus, the binary opposition groom/bride (as well as male/female) is severely troubled and exemplifies the post-structuralist tenets that, firstly, “[...] words are always ‘contaminated’ by their opposites [...]” (Barry 62) and that, secondly, “[...] obsolete senses retain a troublesome and ghostly presence within present-day usage [...]” (Barry 62). What these examples show is that identity is constructed via the employment of binary oppositions (‘I’ is defined via ‘non-I’), and that by deconstructing these binaries, the boundaries of the subject, in this paper the boundaries of bride, might unravel and give way to innovative configurations of (bridal) identity. However, a more sharpened focus in theory is perhaps necessary in order to grasp the full potential of the mad bride’s ambiguous, excessive subject position and the consequential counterhegemonic approach to subjectivity.

¹¹ A poststructuralist outlook depicts language as being linked to anxiety, as it cannot be controlled and may well turn against its users (Barry 60).

1.3. *Neither Subject nor Object: The Abject in Julia Kristeva's Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*

As will be argued below, the mad bride troubles boundaries of identity in most devastating ways. Transgressing the lines of supposed dichotomies, she embodies ambiguity and excess. This paper's main hypothesis is that these transgressions will (threaten to) materialise in deformations of body and dress, in particular in the form of abject bodily matter. While the sections above have presented my theoretical background in the most basic terms and have tentatively indicated ways to trouble identity along the lines of fragmentation and multiplicity, I want to give this wide range of thoughts a sharper focus, which hopefully will be allowed by employing Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject.

Julia Kristeva's work as a critical thinker over the last four decades is described by Maria Margaroni as an attempt to speak from the threshold, to systematically develop "[...] a discursive and conceptual system where thinking qua innovation and beginning is predicated on the ability to cross (i.e., to tread across) familiar, fixed boundaries" (793). Margaroni's description seems valid, especially with concern to Kristeva's theory of the abject, which forms the basic theoretical frame for this paper. Discussing *Powers of Horror* in a revealingly titled study on Kristeva, *Thresholds*, S. K. Keltner similarly asserts "Kristeva's attention to the border between the psyche and the social, at the level of the object, and between psychoanalysis and social description, at the level of method [...]" (55). Likewise locating Kristeva in an intermediary position, Anna Smith points out to her voice as oscillating between identification and analysis (154). The topos of crossing boundaries and oscillating between realms will be evoked frequently in the attempt to define the mad bride – what I therefore suggest in the following pages is that Kristeva's theory of the abject provides a useful theoretical framework for further examination. As it is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to provide a complete and full account of Kristeva's very complex theory, the following pages will select and foreground issues relevant to this paper.

It is generally agreed upon that Kristeva's thinking is positioned in many ways at the threshold – perhaps we might wonder what can be gained from such an intermediary reading position. There is a strand of criticism that stresses Kristeva's "[...] long-standing interest in the ways by which any established order is challenged, undermined, or changed, in the necessity for disturbance [...]" (Goodnow 2). It is the boundary of the Symbolic order that has

interested Kristeva since the beginnings of her intellectual career as it is at this threshold that order can be disturbed, and that the undefinable other can exist. This persistent search for open fields seems to align her with a poststructuralist position comparable to thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida (Mersch 113), the latter of which especially has troubled the distinction between the fundamental philosophical concepts of inside and outside in profound ways (Smith 90). Such an indeterminacy can account for the subject's inability to ever clearly separate from its objects, resulting in an extremely troubled concept of subjectivity (Smith 91). Even though such conceptions have been hailed by, for instance, feminist scholars for their great potential to unravel and obscure existing structures, as well as to incite alternative discourses, Kristeva's writings have attracted considerable criticism (paradoxically also in regard to a perceived essentialism), which will be discussed below.

Julia Kristeva's conception of the abject¹² emanates from an ambiguous place – indeed, abjection is primarily characterised by ambiguity (Kristeva 9) – that calls into question the very borders between inside and outside, subject and object. Dwelling on the notion of proximity, Kristeva introduces the abject as mysteriously ambivalent: “It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated” (Kristeva 1). The abject lies *too* close to the subject in order to be classified an object (Berressem 21), but still cannot be assimilated. Posing this ambiguous threat, it can never enter the Symbolic order, in which the subject is entrenched¹³. The abject is therefore not safely distanced, as would be an object, “[...] which I name or imagine” (Kristeva 1), or a domesticated other, which I can classify along aesthetic parameters – it is this topological specificity that causes the excessive intensity of the abject experience (Berressem 20). Naming and imagining an object proves that it is not the subject, provides the grounds to securely say that it is ‘not me’ – a differentiation the abject eludes. Still, the abject shares one quality of the object: lying at the threshold to the Lacanian Real and thus resisting symbolisation¹⁴, it is opposed to the ‘I’ (Kristeva 1).

¹² The term is a combination of Latin *abicerere* (to throw away, let fall) and French *abjection* (loathing) (Suchsland 122-123), Kristeva adopts the term from Bataille, but takes on a quite different perspective (Krauss 91).

¹³ We should note, however, that the borders to the semiotic are permeable and the subject is never once and for all separated from the semiotic.

¹⁴ This aspect makes it similar to traumatic events (Berressem 20-22).

The abject has the power to put not only identity at stake, but threatens also meaning itself. It is therefore banished, expelled, jettisoned – but it nevertheless “[...] does not cease challenging its master” (Kristeva 2), thus the subject is, despite what this quotation might suggest, far from ‘mastering’ the abject. Still, Kristeva identifies the abject as the subject’s safeguard (recognisable as the taboos installed by the Symbolic order), and as its necessary pre-condition – this is because the individual relies on the rejection of the abject in order to be able to define and defend the boundaries of identity (Kutzbach and Mueller 9). Thus it should be stressed that the abject does not only pose a threat to the subject’s existence, but ambiguously also helps to bring it about in the first place. The subject is formed after and through the expulsion of that which comes to be the abject in a shift from the pre-oedipal dyad with the mother to the castrated separation of linguistic subjectivity – what is cast out is what was the entirety of the infant before the separation with the mother took place (Harradine 73).

At that stage the infant was without borders, unified with the mother and the world. In order to live as discrete being, the constitution of one’s borders is imperative. Given the subject’s identity’s foundation on the logic of exclusion, we can deduce that it is unstable: “[...] the subject will always be marked by the uncertainty of his borders [...]” (Kristeva 63). This instability of borders stems from the fact that the constitution of subjectivity works by “[...] rejecting what [the infant] took itself to be – the mother’s body [...]” (Chanter 63). The phase in which the infant recognises its borders and comes to view its body as separate from its environment, is of course reminiscent of Lacan’s mirror stage. Kristeva, however, depicts the separation as taking place before the traditionally held age of between six and eighteen months¹⁵ (McAfee 46), thus, as being exercised in the process of abjection. In this process the infant expels what appears to be part of its own body. This exclusion takes place in a violent manner but is never exercised once and for all as the abject never ceases to challenge the subject. Here we can understand what the abject distinguishes from the repressed: namely that the abject is always subtly present in our consciousness (McAfee 46).

Despite its eternal presence, the abject must remain, to a certain extent, elusive. Just as filth is not a quality in itself (Douglas 35, 41), the abject is relational. It lurks at boundaries, which obviously cannot exist per se but mark different entities. Kristeva accordingly is careful not to give a neat and closed definition of the abject, but rather approaches it negatively. Gina

¹⁵ Kristeva remains ultimately vague about the time of this first differentiation.

Wisker draws attention to the relational state of the abject: “Kristeva’s definitions of the abject [...] focus on the rejection of that which is other than ‘I’ [...]” (*Don’t Look Now* 22). That secondary literature should provide a wide-ranging array of definitions with different emphases (Zhanial 3), must therefore be considered telling. The abject’s ambiguity and in-between state are inherent to any definition, as is its necessity to the formation of the subject: Hal Foster assesses the definition of the abject as that “[...] what I must get rid of in order to be an I at all” (114) as “canonical”. Foster also points out to the conceptual difficulty of representing the abject (if, however, specifically concerning art) and asks that “[i]f [the abject] is opposed to culture, can it be exposed in culture?” (114)¹⁶. Foster’s question, however, might need reformulation. While it is true that, being its pre-condition, the abject cannot be assimilated into the Symbolic order, which obviously is the realm in which culture is located, it is perhaps too simplistic to say that it merely is opposed to culture. The abject is indeed *opposed* to the subject (Kristeva 1), but an equally important quality is its potential to *form* the subject, which ultimately is entrenched in the cultural process of signification. And, as Hanjo Berressem points out, Kristeva’s theory is predicated on the parameters of regression and repression, which means that abjects can only function from within the Symbolic order, that they “[...] are always already contained fully within the realm of representation/differentiation precisely because they are always already the result of the threat to break it up” (Berressem 27). What threatens to disintegrate the subject, what endangers the ‘I’ to dissolve into non-differentiation, is termed abject.

In an almost lyrically formulated passage, we might find an explanation for the theory’s wide applicability: Kristeva declares that “[i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that is causing abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Consequently, it is not

¹⁶ Kristeva traces abjection in literature, obviously a cultural form, in particular in Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s writing. Reading Céline, we may, according to Kristeva, sense “[...] that fragile spot of our subjectivity [...]” (135), which represents a state of intermediate existence. Here we may find that distinctions of subject and object, inside and outside are exceeded, as well as identities are unsettled (Keltner 72). That Kristeva should discuss Céline’s anti-Semitic writing was heavily criticised (Angerer 128) but simultaneously viewed as providing the means to come to terms with fascism (Suchsland 122). The spreading influence of Kristeva’s essay (published 1982) seems to somewhat coincide with an increasing interest in the abject’s potential to culturally express and the last two decades have seen a rising number of scholars who have integrated the abject in their investigations. Also ‘abject art’ started to be prominent in the beginning of the 1990s (Krauss 89-90) and came to be associated with Kristeva’s theory. What perhaps can be viewed as a parallel movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is the increasing invisibility of the body in both art and academic writing (Magennis 92).

only biologically indispensable mechanisms that make up abjection¹⁷ but, and here Kristeva follows the common definition of abjection, it is when forms dissolve (as when, for instance, animate material starts fouling) that we experience loathing which provokes a culturally learned reaction (Suchsland 123, Angerer 128). There is of course an enormous counter-hegemonic potential lying in these most frequently quoted lines above (see, for example, Mickalites 501, Harradine, Gutiérrez-Albilla). What in this paper is of major interest is that this potential can be found in the most bodily matters. Bodily excretions, for instance, are not the body itself, but form yet a part of it – thus are to be located in-between. They must be expelled in order to keep intact the border between inside and outside. A confusion of this border threateningly points towards annihilation and meaninglessness (Kutzbach and Mueller 8), which is why we, as subjects within the Symbolic, must cleanly separate our body from its excretions.

This separation, however, cannot be exercised in such a clean and radical way (Kristeva 9): once expelled, the abject does not remain at bay, but continues to exercise its claim on the subject, as “abjection is the underside and inner lining of the symbolic order [,] the boundary that separates the subject from its abject is a labile one, unstable and prone to periodic disintegration” (Davis, 248, see also De Nooy 289). As the subject is never completely and totally, but *clumsily* separated from the mother (Kristeva 13), and desires to stay related with the maternal, abjection has an archaic debt lying at its core: “Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be [...]” (Kristeva 10).

In Kristeva’s discourse, the concept of mother keeps returning: the pre-oedipal mother, whose authority represents a constant problem for paternal law and the Symbolic order, reminds the subject of its labile boundaries and the ever-threatening risk of falling back into the maternal dyad existing before the constitution of the subject, which results in the subject’s recurrent drive to abject the mother. Every encounter with the abject ultimately is reminiscent of this initial abjection of the maternal body – all those acts of abjection must be performed in order to secure the border between self and (m)other (Kutzbach and Mueller 8, Kristeva 64). This may account for the primary cause of abjection being the sight or visualisation of bodily

¹⁷ Loathing of the corpse and the skin of milk, for example, proves this.

wastes and fluids: those threaten the subject because they remind of the primal relation to the mother, and thus are never to be re-admitted (Douglas 123).

Drawing on the work of the sociologist Mary Douglas, Julia Kristeva ascertains that filth is a relational quality that can be applied to social structures and their boundaries. Filth in particular represents that which is expelled beyond these boundaries. Equally, bodily secretions traversing the body's boundaries through its orifices are marginal matter (Douglas 121). Therefore, it can be deduced that pollution is only likely to occur in societal structures in which boundaries are clearly defined (Kristeva 69 and Douglas 35, 113). On an abstract level, the margins of the body can be representative of the fragility of any bounded system (Douglas 115), and the traversing of these margins by bodily fluids and excreta foregrounds the vulnerability of these systems – the abject emerges in a fluid excess that denies coherence and threatens ordering systems of static identities (Harradine 74, Grosz *Volatile* 193). Bleeding, in particular menstrual blood, can work as a metaphor for the impossibility of maintaining stable systems of identity (Harradine 82).

Kristeva not only locates the threats of the abject to take place at boundaries and in transitional phases, but also classifies these threats as abject *without*¹⁸ and *within* the body (cancerous growths, as well as pregnancy¹⁹). The latter category is considered more horrifying as it threatens to dissolve the borders of the 'I' (Goodnow 28-34). When the skin as supposedly secure marker of inside and outside is cut or breaks through, the internal fluids of one's body are made visible and expose the clean and proper body as a chimera (Kristeva 53). This option has been extensively exploited in fashion photography in the 1990s, which saw models with skin that was increasingly exposed as not intact, (Arnold 489, 498) thus dispensing with visions of sanitised perfection that characterise, for instance, the Classic ideal of marble, unassailable and unblemished skin – in our urge to conceal the reality of the human, organic/mortal corporeality, it is this ideal we strive for in stylisations of the body. Kristeva's classification of the abject as traitor or as friend who stabs us (4) might come to our mind: a container of our innermost, seemingly endowed with integrity, is revealed to have

¹⁸ Excrement, for example, is considered outside the body but nevertheless as connected to the mother due to sphincteral training in which the mother plays a pivotal role by exerting "[...] the difference of proper-clean and improper-dirty [...]" (Kristeva 72).

¹⁹ This aspect will be extensively discussed in the practical reading of Brenda Chenoweth as mad bride.

deceived us all the time, to have not marked the 'I' as cleanly from the non-I as it made us believe²⁰. Kristeva's concept of the composite describes a situation in which two opposing notions are horrifyingly put together in an act of deliberate duplicity, even treachery: death interferes with what is supposed to secure life (4), or dirty substances violently emerge from a seemingly innocent and clean container. Accordingly, the abject, very much unlike the humanist subject, lacks authenticity and moral consistency (Lechte 160).

Returning to the metaphor of bleeding and the torn skin as exposing the frailty of the borders that supposedly set apart the subject from its surroundings, we might note a parallel to Mary Russo's definition of the grotesque body (in which she follows Bakhtin (26-27)) as an "[...] open, protruding, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change" (62-63)²¹, as opposed to "[...] the Classical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek [...]" (Russo 63). That the grotesque body is unfinished is also due to its inherent ambivalence: it is "[...] death that gives birth" (Bakhtin 25), a composite constellation that Kristeva would term abject. At this point, Miss Havisham might cross our mind as her excess feeds from her body that is outgrowing itself and merging with her withered dress, as well as with the room that confines it: protruding, becoming, unfinished and, due to her indecisive hovering between the oppositional poles of bride and spinster, living and corpse-like, abject. Excesses of the body and identity, i.e. occupying an ambiguous in-between position, and their abject materialisations are of most interest to this paper. These materialisations can be bodily fluids which traverse the body's boundaries – they are abject because they trouble the line we suppose is safely separating I from non-I. Indeed, for Megan Becker-Leckrone, the abject holds the very distinct potential of "[...] putting the subject in the most devastating kind of crisis imaginable" (20).

This paper tries to make use of said devastating crisis of the subject. In particular, it will argue along the lines of multiplicity, ambiguity and fragmentation by working with the figuration mad bride. That it should be the figure of the bride bearing potential to disrupt hegemonic conceptions of a 'natural', normative order replete with well-defined categories

²⁰ The notion of the familiar as most horrifying is frequently employed in horror fiction (Wisker *Don't Look Now* 21).

²¹ Here we might find a way to differentiate the freak from the grotesque: while the freak show as spectacle requires distance, which makes the freak an object and an other to be looked at from afar (Russo 79-80, Thomson 10), the grotesque, like the abject, does not stand apart but merges with the world.

and dichotomous boundaries, must seem puzzling – after all, the bride appears to stand at the very centre of a tightly organised structure that is firmly engrained within hegemonic Western thought, domination and oppression. The bride obviously is a fix integral of one of our culture’s most ritualistic, organised and well-defined spectacle: the white wedding²². This commodified ritual has inscribed at its core what every culture investing in the continuation of its structures must hold to, and which is particularly embodied by the bride, who bears the promises of reproduction, procreation and sustainability²³. Vikki Bell notes about the Western ‘white’ wedding that “[...] it is indeed a moment in which certain cultural awarenesses and identifications are crystallised and anxiously ritualised” (464). As the central figure of this highly charged performance, the bride appears worthy of thorough consideration. The following section 2 will very briefly touch upon romanticised notions of bridal beauty and identity, which shall then be deconstructed in chapter 3.

²² The wedding has come to be normalised and standardised to the extent that it can be ordered and bought as a regular commodity that forms an intrinsic part of our commercial culture (Jarvis 97, Currie 415).

²³ These tenets obviously rely on hetero-normative constellations and kinship patterns that supposedly secure reproductive growth. Kristeva’s theory of the abject has been appropriated in order to challenge these structures (Gutiérrez-Albilla 67).

2. *The Bride as Fluid Identity? Clean, Mannered Bodies and Pristine, White Dresses*

We seem to be living in a society that is, and has long been, obsessed with weddings. When Queen Victoria was married in 1840, all efforts were undertaken to make the spectacle public. In an age long before the emergence of the modern media television and internet, which presently enable a wide access to these events, the protagonists were displayed as wax figures at Madame Tussaud's, which allowed people to retrospectively 'participate' in the spectacle, and contemplate the bridal dress and veil (Felderer 4). Interestingly, it was just this wedding attire that set the standards of what, to a large extent, still constitutes the Western wedding, thus came to define what is considered beautiful. In particular, it established white as the preferred colour for the bridal gown (Harris Walsh 245), as well as made "[...] lace, or lace over silk, and a lace veil with an orange-flower wreath [...] indispensable to a British wedding thereafter" (Hughes 170).

It is an almost ready-made assumption that it is the bride who captures most of the heightened attention directed towards the wedding spectacle (see, for instance, Sobal, Bove and Rauschenbach 113, 118 or Lewis 169), and that it is her who functions as a canvas for collective expectations²⁴. Arguably, a big part of this fascination stems from the compelling look of the bride, specifically from the wedding dress, which is regarded the essence of what the bride's culture considers beautiful (Hughes 157) and which is, due to its exclusive applicability²⁵, an example of conspicuous consumption. Even though the appearance of a bride (in particular her dress) is often described as stunning or breath-taking, the bride mostly is associated with the beautiful, which in Edmund Burke's conception connotes "[...] smallness, smoothness, fragility or delicacy and light [...]" (Covino 3) and which, according to Patricia Yaeger, can be instrumental in keeping women invisible and confined. What is considered ideal in wedding portraits is quite telling for this category of the beautiful: "There is no chaos in this world; like the arrangements within the images, theirs is a world of symmetry and balance. They are the beautiful people, carefree, and dashing" (Lewis 170). The field in which the bride can move is narrow and closely observed: the bride, on the one

²⁴ While it certainly is a coincidence that wedding dresses have come to be mostly white (fashionable muslin was most often available only in white in the Victorian age), Clair Hughes' observation about "[w]hite [as] an absence, a blank sheet waiting to be filled" (72) seems apt at this point nevertheless.

²⁵ Interestingly, though profoundly striving in the opposite of sustainability, the buzzword of today, the dress that is to be used only once in a lifetime, still fascinates widely.

hand, is expected to look spectacular (i.e. conforming to the ideal of hetero-normative conventions of female beauty), but, on the other hand, must not make a spectacle of herself. Social conventions dictate that she must not violate what constitutes serenity, what is considered becoming and beautiful. The category of the beautiful might be put in relation with the Classical, sleek and closed body of white marble, rather than flesh and blood – it is not open, protruding or vast, it must not show any hints of internal bodily (abject) matter. Caroline Magennis notes that

[t]he predominant version of the ideal body in the current Western tradition is one which divests itself of the excesses of female embodiment. This body is discrete and involves the containment of potential transgressions against order and the boundaries of the self. (92)

I would like to add that this model of the ideal female body in particular applies to current Western *wedding* tradition: functioning as a Panopticon, the Western white wedding aims to produce a clean, mannered and closed bridal body that docilely seeks to stay within the boundaries of identity, body and dress. Tellingly, the artist Helen D. S. Anderson describes as frame for her series of black-and-white photographs (for an example see Fig. 1) “[...] the ubiquitous story, told over and over again, to young girls and women of their wedding day [...] Her day planned and executed to *exacting standards* [...]” (106, emphasis mine). These exacting standards arguably rely on the constant reaffirmation of tight boundaries and narrow confines²⁶, and on the continuous retelling of those narratives that constitute feminine beauty and agency in Western culture. As Charles Lewis argues, “[...] “her [the bride’s] day” is one where the “ideal” results in her own objectification and commodification” (183). Ultimately, he further states, “[s]he is the “beautiful bride” in the spotlight rather than the individual human being about to consummate an important relationship” (Lewis 183). Again: bride is constructed as ideal, rather than individual, as white marble, rather than flesh and blood.

As also the tableau of wax figures representing Queen Victoria’s wedding suggests, we are obsessed with the somewhat static, confined and clean *image* of bride, the cultural mediations of which produce its alleged coherence and containment. This image seems to be

²⁶ Quite revealingly Dawn H. Currie refers to an “[...] almost military precision implied in wedding planning [...]” (416).

dependent on its specific stories, icons, and metaphors, rather than on the actual bodies taking on numerous individual forms²⁷. The wax figures representing the participants of Queen Victoria's wedding demonstrate how identities are depicted as relatively secure in the ritual process of getting married. Frozen in time, the bride is captured at a particular point²⁸ in what, in fact, is a process. The bride has an identity of becoming, which might indicate some potential of rupture. The fluidity of bridal identity may point out ways of disrupting the narratives that confine women to this particular role. In fact, this uplifting potential will be activated and exploited in the course of this paper, as the "ubiquitous story" of becoming a bride will be told *anew*, and as her confinement to said exacting standards will be questioned. This paper sets out to lift the veil that in the photo below tellingly leaves things unsaid and literally covered up. In fact, what these 'things' are, is of most interest to this analysis and therefore will be explored in detail. In the course of this paper, I advance a model of identity that features an epistemological shift towards what will be denoted 'mad bride', a definition that allows a renegotiation of (bridal) identity boundaries and standards of exclusion along the lines of materiality.



Fig. 1: *Waiting*. "[The bride's] existence is defined, interpretable only by the clothing she wears and the flowers she carries. She is never allowed, or perhaps never chooses [...] to escape the confines of the image's edge. She is thus defined, reduced even, to the story of her wedding day" (Anderson 106).

²⁷ That being said, what becomes relevant to my definition of 'bride' (in particular of mad bride, which is to be advanced in section 5), is the cultural shaping of meanings and of images that is not to be confused with 'real' women in a certain phase of their life and the real, experienced consequences this phase has on their life. In the discussion of the Cartesian identity, this paper has drawn on sociological accounts of such 'real' women and included glimpses of these women's perspectives. However, my approach is foremost concerned with the way such discourses are shaped and how meaning is produced within these discourses. To point this out might appear somewhat trivial – yet it once again stresses the idea that the categories evoked are constructed and naturalised into ontology, a premise on which this paper is built on.

3. *Lifting the Veil: Deconstructing Bride*

Having dipped into the mythical reservoir of romanticised visions of Western white weddings, it seems worthwhile to turn my attention towards the way the bride emerges within academic discourses. This endeavour specifically seeks to explore *instabilities* of the signifier ‘bride’, which can enable the advancement of *mad bride* as a model that deviates from conventional identity structures in that it embraces ambiguity at its very core. This paper seeks to seize these instabilities by deconstructing given binary oppositions. First, this discussion enables us to understand the signifier ‘bride’ as inherently unstable. Second, it will touch upon additional aspects (for instance, the sublime power of the gory wedding dress, or the bride’s prospect of becoming monstrous) relevant to a thorough analysis of the mad bride.

When it comes to the discussion of a certain type of female characters in fiction, one could speak of a paradox at work: curiously, ‘bride’ does not equal ‘bride’. At first sight, this postulation may strike as surprising, given that ‘bride’ is, as has been briefly sketched out above, probably most readily associated with a strongly conventionalised role that does not allow for a lot of room to move, that, as Figure 1 suggests, is confined to the edge of a seemingly invariably fixed image. As this section shall demonstrate, however, this “[...] most common female role [...]” (Young) is not as stable as might conventionally be assumed, and in fact can take multiple, at times conflicting forms.

Discussing Miss Havisham’s wedding dress in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, Clair Hughes comments on the long tradition of fictional female characters ‘going mad’ in white satin. As a second example of, what she calls a “[...] curiously persistent stereotype that is rarely questioned” (Hughes 167), Hughes gives Ophelia, calling her “[...] *another* thwarted bride [...]” (Hughes 167, emphasis mine) and thus implies a parallel between Ophelia and Miss Havisham: apparently, both are (mad) brides. She further suggests Sir Walter Scott’s Lucy Ashton, or, rather Gaetano Donizetti’s more graphic Lucia as the source of the stereotypical image. In that particular example, the woman takes centre stage as the “[...] insane, murderous bride in white [...]” (Hughes 168), and thus indicates ‘dangerous’ as an additional layer of the stereotype. White satin as the sartorial frame needed for these Mad

²⁸ The static image of a bride potentially becomes uncanny, as is the case with Miss Havisham. “All things about her have become transfixed” (Dickens 58), which makes Pip perceive her deformed body just as uncanny as waxwork.

Scenes (even if it is only collectively imagined, as it is in Ophelia's case) apparently is suggested as a unifying factor as regards these fictitious females in their designation as 'bride': Hughes concludes that it is from the impressively blood-splattered gown of Lucy/Lucia "[...] that Bertha Rochester, Wilkie Collins's Anne Catherick, Miss Havisham – and countless others – spring" (Hughes 169)²⁹.

It is obvious, though, that those characters mentioned above do not inhabit the same 'bridal' state, if such a category can be established at all. Oddly enough, it is also obvious, however, that all of them may be called a bride in one way or the other – not only with respect to the white dresses they are wearing³⁰. We could propose that the difficulty in assigning a fixed meaning to 'bride' in the discussion above, stems from the fact that it is applied in the context of fiction, where parameters we know in our actual 'reality' do not necessarily apply, so that 'bride' as employed in cultural artefacts is not coterminous with designations of the 'real' brides. However, also in 'everyday' usage, the term 'bride' that we seem to use so offhandedly carries ambiguities and is conspicuously pluralistic, as is evident in the respective entry in the OED³¹: thus 'bride' denotes

[a] woman at her marriage; a woman just about to be married or very recently married. The term is particularly applied on the day of marriage and during the 'honeymoon', but is frequently used from the proclamation of the banns, or other public announcement of the coming marriage. (OED, second edition 1989, online version June 2011)³²

The same plurality of meanings as connected to the term 'bride' applies to the characters as discussed by Hughes: when Ophelia and Miss Havisham might be called

²⁹ This image is, of course, not confined to the realm of fiction, but has taken a quite prominent role in fashion shows. Alexander McQueen's first collection in 1993, for instance, featured blood on white dresses.

³⁰ Or, as in Ophelia's case, due to lack of textual evidence for such a garment, are merely presupposed by public imagination to carry – the stereotype probably became perpetuated on the Elizabethan stage, where Ophelia traditionally was dressed in white (Showalter 11).

³¹ This first entry on 'bride' specifically focuses on ambiguities of temporality. This paper makes use of such ambiguities to expose the mad bride's subject position as ambiguous, thus transposing them to questions of identity.

³² As to illustrate the potential of conflict and trouble these ambiguities carry, an anecdote given in the OED shall be provided: "In the parliamentary debate on Prince Leopold's allowance, Mr. Gladstone, being criticized for speaking of the Princess Helen as the 'bride', said he believed that colloquially a lady when engaged was often called a 'bride'. This was met with 'Hear! hear!' from some, and 'No! no!' from others. Probably 'bride elect' would have satisfied critics" (OED, second edition 1989, online version June 2011).

thwarted brides, thus, having not yet reached (and being unable to ever reach) bridal status and consequently being stuck eternally in this in-between place³³, Bertha Rochester may be said to have long passed this threshold, being stripped of her wedding dress³⁴ and famously locked up in the attic. Still she is not called a ‘mad *wife*’, which, as it all too painfully turns out, she legitimately is. Is it thus not rather Jane Eyre who is the bride, thwarted as it were? Why exactly it should be Bertha Rochester that is included in the assembly of *brides*³⁵ is not clarified in Hughes’ account.

Whereas Lucy Ashton as insane bride seems to go along with the meanings of ‘bride’ as sketched out in the OED, as it is her wedding day when she ‘goes mad’ and pictorially wounds her husband, Anne Catherick herself never gets married (albeit her double Laura Fairlie does), but merely dresses in white. However, even Lucy Ashton, who is said to have inspired the image of the mad bride, does not ‘go mad’ in a *wedding dress*. Rather it is her white *nightgown* that ends up blood-splattered and in which Lucy is described as insane. Clair Hughes comments on an interesting cliché concerning Lucy Ashton’s dress being blood-splattered. In the introduction to the Oxford edition of Scott’s *The Bride of Lammermoor*, the editor refers to the raven falling dead in front of Lucy Ashton and splattering her white (!) dress – only it is *blue* that Lucy is wearing in the quoted situation. The following subsection 3.1. shall elucidate aspects of the ambiguously present gory white dress.

³³ Ophelia as forever floating in her watery grave, which Pre-Raphaelite paintings have successfully implanted in our collective imagination (the most iconic of which probably is Sir John Everett Millais’ ‘Ophelia’, a visual account of an extremely static, frozen Ophelia), and Miss Havisham as eternally conserved, frozen at twenty minutes to nine o’clock for the rest of her life. Miss Havisham is frozen as bride in all eternity as she is stuck in the transitional phase between single and married woman, and emerges as bride in the real sense actually only very briefly.

³⁴ “It was white and straight; but whether gown, sheet or shroud, [Jane Eyre] cannot tell” (Brontë 283) – this quote further evokes white as a signifier of death and mourning, which, in some cultures, displays a close proximity to wedding traditions (Ball and Torem-Craig 6, 57).

³⁵ That she is mad is relatively straight-forward, both in the conventional sense, as well as in the sense used in this paper (i.e. by blurring the line within binary oppositions, in this example between human and animal).

3.1. “[...] she stood lost in eternity wearing a crazy dress, watching the immense sky”³⁶: *The Sublime Terror of the Gory Gown*

Doubtlessly, the white dress besmirched with blood (and in other examples made abject with other fluids, or via other processes altogether) is exciting and triggers emotions. Fascinating and repelling, the dirtied dress pairs the beautiful (we might recall that the bridal dress is considered to reflect everything the bride’s culture considers beautiful (Hughes 157)) with the abject, and finally might be said to exercise the power of sublime terror by evoking notions of madness, pain and danger. The paradox of being drawn to the gory bridal dress, while at the same time being repulsed by it, affects us all the more due to the contradictory and conflicting emotions it stirs. Ambivalence seems to be a key moment: the dress is repellent, yet fascinating, absent and central, even omnipresent. David Bromwich observes that “[...] it is the nature of things which hold us by custom to affect us very little whilst we are in possession of them, but strongly when they are absent” (41).

The affective power of the blood-splattered white gown, which is actually not part of *The Bride of Lammermoor*’s diegesis, but is imagined nevertheless in dramatically colourful terms, seems to work similarly – only that we cannot even say for sure if the dress is absent or present. This gripping gory dress appears, also when it is not merely imagined, to be a separate image, rather than a part of the narrative. The spectacular use of costume, or what might be called “[...] a vertical interjection into a horizontal and linear narrative” (Bruzzi and Church Gibson 123), is affective and creates bodily reactions on an extra-diegetic level. It may disrupt the narrative and exist ‘in its own right’ – even if it has never existed in the first place. In the phenomenon of the gory bridal gown we get a glimpse of the mad bride’s subversive potential: far from being confined to either the claustrophobic category of the beautiful in general, or the narrow confines of the image purported by the white wedding in particular, she transgresses a variety of borders and affectively reaches out to us.

We might also notice the bodily language Clair Hughes uses to account for the white dress imagined by said editor: she (and probably we as well) “[...] cannot escape the *grip* of

³⁶ (Carter 18): Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop* features Melanie, a 15-year-old girl who poses in her mother’s wedding dress and is overwhelmed by the sublime setting of the nocturnal garden. In the course of the ‘wedding-dress-night’ she besmirches the bridal gown with her own blood and is confronted with a serious crisis of identity that stretches well beyond this night, and in fact becomes a central topos of the novel. In particular, Melanie hovers between the status of human and doll and might thus be defined as mad bride.

the white dress [...]” (Hughes 168, emphasis mine). The white dress, or, more accurately, the *blood-splattered* white dress³⁷, reaches out to us, reaches out of the narrative (in which it paradoxically never was), gets a grip on us³⁸ and, seemingly having a life of its own, is invested with active, uncontrollable power – we might perhaps call it sublime terror. This is a particularly fascinating aspect, given that this dress is, in its true sense, actually non-existent in the first place: the gory bridal dress that gets a grip on us is not sustained by any textual evidence. Impossible to be fully grasped, neither the sublime, nor the abject have an object either (Kristeva 12) but are rather characterised by a sense of discontinuity (Wilson 306). Their affective power largely stems from this discontinuity – they haunt us because they can neither be entirely understood, nor expelled. In my practical analysis of ‘A Coat of White Primer’, the aspect of the gripping, yet absent gory wedding dress will play a paramount role.

This particular kind of wedding dress simultaneously poses a threat and an imperative: Clair Hughes observes that in a production of Donizetti’s opera “[...] it would be a *brave* director now who put his leading lady into anything other than white satin for the great Mad Scene” (169, emphasis mine). This observation can be tentatively confirmed by a simple Google picture search: eleven out of the first twelve findings depict Lucia di Lammermoor in her gory white dress. To sum up, we can say that the originally absent dress is continuously forcing its way amongst us, is ever lurking in our imagination, and exercising a claim on, for instance, opera directors who need bravery in denying it, in not materialising it for the audience. Arguably, the beautiful is also present and close to us, just as the wax figure depicting Queen Victoria in her wedding dress is. However, its presence is unambiguous, not menacing, it can be grasped and understood: displaying the queen’s wedding dress reduces the distance between “[...] this most important garment” (Mee and Safronova 146) and the spectator – even when the bride in question is the empire’s most powerful woman. Similar to the quite common practice of reporting important (mainly royal) weddings, in particular the bride’s dress, nothing remains ambiguous. In 1922 “[...] *The Times* published details of Princess Mary’s wedding, including minute descriptions of her dress, embroidery, veil,

³⁷ It is certainly a daunting and possibly a far-fetched suggestion, but I want to formulate it nevertheless: Perhaps our culture’s craving for the motif of blood besmirching the white bridal dress might be read as a substitute for other cultural circles’ tradition in which the display of the bloody linen after the wedding night completes the wedding ritual and serves as visible proof of consummation, as well as of the bride’s invaluable virginity.

³⁸ As has been argued above, the abject similarly will not release its grip on the subject, even if it has been violently expelled.

trimmings, and the colors of the materials” (Mee and Safronova 146), which consequently established a new understanding of the beautiful.

Contrastingly, the sublime terror of the blood-besmirched wedding dress is incomparably affective in its ambiguity, vastness and infinity that triggers our imagination, rather than confines it by setting tight standards of what defines beauty. The gory bridal dress demands us, poses a subtle danger and threateningly forces us to visualise, materialise it even. Revered for its beauty, we yearn for it and want to hold it, yet, with an equally great impulse, we want to simultaneously expel it due to its gory materiality. Notably, this ambiguity is characteristic of the abject as well. The gory bridal dress is disrupting and distracting in its joining of opposites (note the parallel to the mad bride): not only do the beautiful and the abject merge (and thus bring about sublime terror), but also the line allegedly separating the Symbolic order from semiotic chaos is shattered. Blood, the symbol of maternal, reproductive power joins the wedding dress, the symbol of patriarchal exchange systems seeking to control just that archaic female power.

In line with the main hypothesis that the mad bride’s ambiguous subject position will materialise in some form, the motif of the ambiguously present dirtied wedding gown, which merges the abject/maternal and the beautiful, will play a paramount role in the practical analysis of this paper. Arguing that “[...] dress form[s] the key link between individual identity and the body, providing the means, or “raw material,” for performing identity” (Entwistle 337), as well as functioning as “[...] the insignia by which we are read and come to read others [...]” (Entwistle 337), Joanne Entwistle gives the example of the morally invested reading of ‘faulty’ dress, in particular, stained clothing that will embarrass its wearer. One might assume that a dirtied bridal gown will produce social condemnation and embarrassment on an almost fathomless scale, especially if this most treasured dress is stained with abject corporeal fluids such as blood, thus, marginal matter that has “[...] traversed the boundary of the body” (Douglas 121). Certainly, the wearer of such a dress violates bridal decorum and the boundaries of what constitutes female, contained beauty. Another effect of the gory gown, however, might be a subversion of existing aesthetic categories and the constitution of “[...] a kind of feminine sublime [...]” (Krauss 92). After all, we seem to be haunted more by the affective, sublime iconography of a blood-splattered wedding dress, rather than by a pure and pristine one that simply reflects everything the bride’s culture finds beautiful. Kristeva’s

theory of the abject should prove an invaluable lens for reading this phenomenon, as in her account the confrontation with the abject creates an ecstatic experience similar to what we feel when being overcome by the sublime.

Kristeva makes an interesting point about how the abject can be transformed in productive ways. For her, this is mostly achieved by rendering the abject sublime. While manifestations of the abject are found in manifold discourses and stretch throughout history, responses to abjection can vary decisively. The sublime takes a special place in this aspect and Kristeva views it as a powerful mode of discourse. Both the abject and the sublime do not have an object, as well as share a certain ambivalence of spatial layers: “[...] the sublime is a something added that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here* and *there*, as others and sparkling, a divergence, an impossible bounding” (Kristeva 12, emphasis in the original). The abject, on the other hand, “[...] lies there, quite close, but [...] cannot be assimilated” (Kristeva 1) – due to the inability to assign a specific place to both sublime and abject, they cannot be grasped. Another parallel concerns excessiveness: “The sublime is the limitless, the boundless, the absolutely great that overwhelms with awe and terror” (Smith 36). As Megan Becker-Leckrone analyses, the crucial difference between the two modes is that “[...] abject discourses neither “transcend” the human horror to which they are bound nor exempt us from that horror” (38). Kristeva seems to point towards some kind of catharsis possible in particular ways of responding to the abject. In her account, literature (particularly Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s) is a somewhat privileged mode in which sublimation can happen: “[...] it is within literature that I finally saw [abjection] carrying, with its horror, its full power into effect” (Kristeva 207). Ultimately, sublimation for Kristeva is a productive, ‘elevated’ way of dealing with the abject. While abjection is a symptom, sublimation is a way of coming to terms with this experience: “In the symptom, the abject permeates me. I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control” (Kristeva 11). The sublime power of the bloodied wedding dress indicates that the bride need not necessarily be thought as passively remaining confined to the belittling category of the beautiful. In this literal (the externalisation of bodily fluids, i.e. blood) and figurative (the category of the beautiful is subject to spillage) liquid state, categories are cracked open, stability is undone. Abject fluids dirtying the bridal gown might also be read as an indication of bridal identity as fluid and floating freely – an aspect that shall be explored in the following section.

3.2. *Becoming Brides*

The above-stated observations about the sublime terror posed by the soiled wedding dress have started out from the paradoxes connected to bridal identity that inevitably emerge on closer inspection of Clair Hughes's observations – I shall now return to those ambiguities. While said foreword's conspicuous confusion of dress colours indicates that we are fascinated, as well as repelled³⁹ by the blood-splattered white dress, it also reveals more about the inability to define bride as a fixed entity. It shows us that white as dress colour is not at all stable in defining a bride, let alone a mad bride. Also when we consider these characters' different stories (captured at their day of marriage, or in an in-between state due to the fact that a wedding will never take place, or years after a marriage, possibly thwarting another one to take place), the term 'bride' must appear all the more slippery and fluid.

Paradoxically, calling someone a bride thus seems to open up an array of questions rather than assign a fixed position outlined along stable boundaries – Elizabeth Young explicitly refers to “[...] the instability of the term “bride” [...]”, which in this section shall be explored. Employing binary pairs lays bare the dilemma and enables us to discuss the referential dynamics of the term 'bride', which should prove a fruitful way of reading her subject position. Embarking on this endeavour, the first question shall be: Can a 'bride' be characterised by the marker '+ *married*' or '- *married*'? Neither designation is sufficiently satisfying when the term is used out of context. The OED lists as one meaning of 'bride', when deployed in slang contexts, a woman or a girl, especially a girlfriend, notably without necessarily bearing any reference to her marital status (OED, second edition 1989, online version June 2011). Still, it is emphasised that the term is in currency to particularly signify 'girlfriend', thus rather pointing out the woman's relationship to a man without being married to him. In German, the term 'Braut' is used as an at times sexist slang term for 'young girl/woman' that seems to suggest that this person is not only *not* married, but that she is on the contrary, to speak in the vocabulary of trade and finance that usually still dominates matters of gender and marriage (Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs 530), rather 'free' and

³⁹ This ambiguous blend is reminiscent of the abject, as well as of the mad bride herself – the thin line separating monstrosity and serenity will be touched upon in the discussion of the glove as potentially rendering the bride abject when taking it off and revealing its inside.

‘available’⁴⁰. Deploying the term in this way, men would comment on the corporeal attractiveness, and thus the market value tied to the body of some ‘Braut’, but probably would not usually refer to their steady girlfriends.

Despite these quite disparate usages and meanings of the term ‘bride’, it seems undisputable that the notion of bride has something to do with getting (or being?) married, however vague this presumption has to remain. Paradoxically, in the popular collective imagination shaped by nostalgic versions of heterosexual romance framed by white satin, veil and orange-blossom, we seem to know perfectly well what goes along with a bride – however, it also appears that this is not the whole picture. There seem to be some ambiguous, unaccountable aspects lurking behind the shining radiance of a bride, beginning with what should appear to define her very identity as a bride – being married or unmarried. What the term ‘bride’ implies in its full form must thus remain nebulous, pointing towards the potential of a subject position characterised by ambiguities and uncertainties.

The definition of ‘bride’ provided by the OED (see p. 28) strongly focuses on temporality, in fact the entry lists alternatives of ‘bride’ as specific identities frozen at different points. However, what seems important to note, especially if we want to problematize the bride’s identity as fixed, is that her subject position is eminently informed by the notions of process and performativity. Implying a *performative* act⁴¹, ‘bride’ is not a static concept, but describes an identity that is becoming and in a fluid process, which includes the stepping over the boundary that makes a single woman a wife. The OED’s entry on ‘bride’ rather focuses on specific points within this process, enumerating states along a chronological line, but does not necessarily reveal its fluid, let alone its performative aspect. It is crucial to note, however, that just as identity has come to be understood as a “[...] ‘cut’ or a snapshot of

⁴⁰ In this usage the term probably does not imply the referred woman’s availability for marriage, but rather her ‘aptness’ for sexual intercourse, even though she would classify as a viable player in the marriage market.

⁴¹ In cultural studies, identity is not only to be considered as discursively constructed, but also as in a progress of *becoming* and as *performative*, a notion that has been firmly established in the last two decades and on which there is broad consensus among a wide range of scholars. The concept of becoming evidently refutes the notion of an identity’s essence that lies there as given and ready to be discovered. Identity as in the process of becoming includes the idea that its various identity factors (i.e. nationality, gender, ethnicity) are perpetually being produced, ever shifting and its meanings continually deferred. Becoming as a crucial aspect of identity is particularly pronounced in Judith Butler’s conception of (gender) identity as “[...] performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler *Gender* 25). Stressing identity’s *dynamic* formation, such conceptions refute conventional notions of the subject as “[...] an autonomous and stable entity, the ‘core’ of the self, and the independent, authentic source of action and meaning” (Hall 55).

unfolding meanings” within cultural studies (Barker “Identity”), the apparently coherent image of ‘bride’ is in fact best understood as a mosaic. The OED entry quite tellingly depicts ‘bride’ in the manner of cuts and snapshots according to different points in a seemingly stable chronology that should, however, not be misunderstood as static, but part of a continuous and unfolding process. That this process does not necessarily go in one (safe) direction shall be discussed below.

It is frequently acknowledged that the bride inhabits a role of becoming. In sociological, mundane terms, what she is becoming is a wife (Bell 465). As has been established by Claude Lévi-Strauss and developed further by Gayle Rubin, the bride is confined within the heterosexual matrix: in this system she is rendered a gift that serves as the foundation of male social relations. Susanne Frieese sketches the ritual process in which a person moves “[...] from one social status to another” (56) as being partitioned into three stages. She devises this process along a conventional chronological line and sets the point when a woman becomes a bride with the proposal of marriage. Basically, her account is built on the motif of boundary transgressions between the sacred and the profane (thus drawing on Van Gennep’s theory of ritual processes, which many accounts on the wedding do, see, for instance, Harris Walsh, Douglas (114) or Otnes and Lowrey):

This process of leaving the group of single women and becoming a bride entails traversing the *first boundary*, initiating the movement between the sacred and the profane. After leaving her social group, however, a bride does not immediately become a member of the group of married women. She finds herself in an in-between stage, a bride-to-be, which can be understood as a state of limbo or liminality. The bride-to-be leaves this uncertain second stage after crossing a *second boundary*, getting married [...] The crossing of this second boundary marks her entry into the circle of married women on the wedding day, which then completes the third and final stage of the transitional process. (Frieese 56, emphasis in the original)

Even though Frieese stresses the second stage as a state of limbo, her account strongly draws on quite intact, easily identifiable boundaries. Indeed, she identifies the physical entering of a bridal store as the first step towards the women’s new social status (Frieese 57-58), which proposes an actually quite close relationship between language and the way we experience the world we live in. Not only spatial, also temporal reference points appear relatively fixed: the marriage proposal coincides with ‘becoming a bride’ (Frieese 56) and the wedding day features the climax and integration of the bride into the social group of married women. Frieese acknowledges that the identity of the bride is one in the status of becoming, as

well as one that involves the transitions and transgressions of boundaries. Her account, however, depicts these transitions as pointing towards one particular direction: joining the group of married women. In Friese's model, structure ultimately is valid and intact and does not leave much space for counter-hegemonic explorations.

Also Vikki Bell reads the bride as being *in statu nascendu*, in the process of coming into existence, but differs in her reading by dwelling on the dark, problematic spots inherent to this process. She argues that instead of straight-forwardly heading towards the haven of marriage and adopting the identity of 'married woman', the bride's becoming is a transformation that involves profound anxiety and demands tight control, "[as] in the movement, the transformation, the care of the signs is crucial to ensure the correct direction of transformation" (466). This quotation implies that there is not merely one possible direction in which the transformation of the bride may go, and is thus determinedly different from Susanne Frieses's account of a predominantly neat and logical process – notably, both analyses are firmly situated in the context of the traditional Western 'white' wedding. In an inspiring analysis of the hand⁴² as a crucial sign within the wedding ceremony, Vikki Bell takes as her starting point a piece of advice given on a regular page called 'Bride's Counsel' featured in the magazine 'Bride'. In this snippet the bride-to-be gets advice on how to remove her gloves before the ring exchange: "Try to make the removal a serene and elegant part of the ring exchange, by gently tugging the tips of each finger on your left hand and then sliding off the glove without turning it inside out" ('Bride' July/August 1995, qtd. in Bell 463).

The extract implies that revealing the inside of the glove would not be serene, elegant or becoming. Here we might turn our attention to the ambiguity of the term 'becoming', which can mean both 'that which is befitting or proper' and 'that which is coming into existence' (OED, second edition 1989, online version June 2011). While on the explicit, mundane level, the counsel doubtlessly is concerned with the first meaning of 'becoming', thus warning against appearing too 'plump' or not elegant (here we might ask *why* exactly this way of removing the glove is not elegant), Bell argues that it is the ambiguous direction that the bride's coming into existence can take that is culturally troublesome and needs to be tightly regulated. One

⁴² The hand not only plays a vital role in Western wedding ceremonies, as is reflected in the expression 'taking her hand', but also takes a special status in the beauty ideal of fattened Tunisian Jewish brides (Salamon and Juhasz (11-13).

might also argue that the existing anxiety stems from both meanings which might be considered intertwined, so that the bride is becoming, befitting and proper only when her coming into existence is exercised in the correct direction. As we will see, pursuing the wrong direction in the process of transformation would make her abject and monstrous.

Why then is it that the act of exteriorising the inside of the glove cannot be considered ‘becoming’? Evoking Lévi-Strauss’ and Rubin’s theory about the exchange of women, Vikki Bell suggests that the glove’s interior must not be displayed in “[...] a ceremony that is about the outward displays of circulation [...] Her interiority disrupts an exchange between the men who are becoming linked through her, in which she is exchanged, the gifted” (463-464). What is crucial for the purpose of my work is the fact that Vikki Bell takes as her starting point the glove’s inner lining and in the next sentence talks about *her* (i.e. the bride’s) interiority. I would like to pursue the stance that the glove can stand for the bride’s body⁴³ and question why her interiority must not be visible in her transformation process.

It is perhaps redundant to point out that a ritual that is so strongly concerned with different stages (at this point we might recall Susanne Frieese’s model of the process as basically a succession of boundary transgressions), the involved boundaries have to be intact, as otherwise the traversing would be meaningless. Displaying the bride’s interiority hints towards bodily boundaries that are radically violated, in crisis, null. Inner matter turned outside is troubling to our conception of neatly separated realms, such as I and non-I. In Kristeva’s theory of the abject, the interiority of a woman’s body is particularly unsettling as it reminds us of our initial bond with the maternal body and threatens the I with a possible falling back into this stage of non-separation again, thus pointing towards the annihilation of meaning and the self. The female body as defying the cultural imperatives of being contained and closed obviously disrupts notions of what would be considered ‘becoming’ and threateningly hints towards abject materiality, bodily fluids that are culturally coded as unsightly, and must not be turned exterior in order not to collapse the boundary separating inner and outer materiality.

⁴³ It is not unorthodox to have bridal accessories stand for the bride herself: Simon R. Charsley notes that the wedding cake traditionally represents the bride, and that cutting this cake is a clear symbol of the initiation to sexuality. The proximity of cake and bride is very pronounced in the portrayal of Miss Havisham’s body, which seems to grow together with the surrounding cobwebs, as does her bride-cake.

What for the purpose of this paper is especially intriguing about the anxiety with the glove's interior is that it might also be read as exemplifying our culture's fear of the configuration 'both/and' rather than 'either/or'. Similar to the half-way inverted glove, the abject cannot be identified as either object or subject, inside or outside, but rather poses the "[...] threat of indistinction between the two" (Becker-Leckrone 33). Thus, we could argue that it is not so much the *interior* of the glove that is threatening to the image of the contained bride, but that it is rather that the simultaneous display of *both* interior *and* exterior that provokes fear of potentially collapsing borders. As when putting off a glove the easiest way, namely by turning it inside out, there is a considerable moment during this process when both interior *and* exterior linings of the glove are visible.

A pair of gloves designed by Elsa Schiaparelli might clarify this last point: displacing inside and outside of the body, the gloves feature paintings of both red veins (suggestive of interiority) and light blue piping (symbolising the outward appearance of skin). In her discussion of these gloves, Caroline Evans articulates the pressing question: "[...] are we inside or outside the body?" (7). The gloves' appeal emanates from the inability to decide – it is the confusion of interiority and exteriority, the simultaneous display of *both* inside *and* outside that is unsettling as well as fascinating. Taking this aspect a step further, we might argue that the bridal glove turned inside out troubles "[...] what, for the subject, is a vital if not precarious boundary: that marking the difference between inside and outside" (Davis 247). Different layers of conflicting meaning (being marked both '+inside' and '+outside') suggest an identity that is ambiguous, becoming and fluid rather than fixed – this overabundance of meaning also applies to the bride, whose becoming can go in directions unexpected and thus may provide an example for a subject in process whose meanings are ever shifting.

This is strongly reminiscent of the mad bride who, as will be argued below, similarly occupies an ontological status of redundancy, embodying 'both/and', rather than 'either/or'. This semantic overdetermination is troubling to any clear-cut conception of boundaries within binary dichotomies. Consequently, this example not only includes the abject subversion of the hierarchy interior/exterior by favouring the hierarchically lower interior (in extension, the abject interior of the female body), but also features an abject coupling of polarities (A *and* B). Furthermore, this method of putting off one's glove possibly includes the deformation of

the hand's shape (the fingers usually are not turned inside out), which is a hint towards the emergence of monstrous body shapes and the loss of serenity and beauty, too.

Indeed, Vikki Bell further suggests that the interior of the glove points towards the threat that the bride is becoming a kind of monstrous freak, a “[...] double-handed, triple or even quadruple-handed creature [...]” (466). She proposes to “[...] read the anxious bride's potential becoming-monstrous as a cultural anxiety about women's desire” (Bell 466) and gives as example the wide-spread stereotype of the bride as dangerous monster that is revealed when lifting her veil. This motif is to be found in various cultural contexts: for instance, the veil serves as protection from the evil eye, “[...] a condition that only the purification of the marriage ceremony could alleviate” (Ball and Torem-Craig 13), feared in Morocco and Ancient India. Also in ancient Rome face coverings were “[...] purported to prevent malevolent influences from harming the unwary groom [...]” (Ball and Torem-Craig 13).

The obvious implication of the bride turning into a quadruple-handed creature is the jarring image of the becoming-animal – also this prospect is evoked by one of Schiaparelli's pair of gloves that features gold claws in place of fingernails, which has the effect of “[...] combining beauty with menace, desire with dread” (Evans 8). Bell argues that “[i]n her movement of the hand, the bride must struggle to retain her hand as only ever human, never monstrous, never the becoming-animal” (466). The danger, of course, is not to become an animal in the literal sense, but to enter a “[...] zone of uncertainty [...]” (Bell 466) and to blur the boundary that sets apart human and animal – we might also bear in mind Kristeva's observation that “[t]he abject confronts us [...] with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*” (12, emphasis in the original). We can note the similarities to Susanne Frieze's account of the bride entering different zones of identification. Bell's stance, however, demonstrates what can go culturally wrong in this process, rather than presents it as a straight-forward journey towards an unambiguous goal. She reminds us that it is “[t]he potential to make a spectacle of herself [that the bride] seeks advice against” (Bell 466). There is “[...] fear [...] that she slips to reveal herself as full of animal-passion, that [the groom] will marry a monster; requesting her hand in marriage, he requests her humanity” (Bell 468).

The bride must not, as the magazine also warns, appear too eager to remove her glove and receive the ring: in order to stay within the frame that defines her as becoming and

properly bridal, she has to take her time (“[...] nobody will rush you” (‘Bride’ July/August 1995, qtd. in Bell 463)). She must not perform as though she really was an active predator who does not patiently *receive*, but *demand*s and *takes* in an animalistic, vampiric sense. The bride’s becoming seems to take place on a very slippery slope and thus has to be minutely regulated⁴⁴. For, when connected to sexual desires, the glove turned fully inside out would not only be an unbecoming, but indeed a painful sight that is to be strictly avoided: the missing fingers of the turned glove might be read as making acutely aware of the threat that taking her hand, lifting her veil potentially entails. Vikki Bell draws attention to the fearful and ghostly images that surround the lifting of the veil and in particular mentions a Smirnoff ad, in which the bride reveals her ‘true nature’ and turns into a vampire the moment she goes to kiss the groom (466, see Fig. 2) – thus, the bride is revealed as gory, in the sense of *thirsting* for blood. Lifting the veil symbolises the initiation into sexuality (Matrix and Greenhill 6) – when the bride to be revealed turns out to be monstrous, the threat she poses might thus be read in sexual terms. Certainly an unaccountable array of such images swarms in our collective imagination – we might, for example think of a character listed as The Crone in Tim Burton’s *Sleepy Hollow*, who, when she takes off her veil⁴⁵ reveals sharp teeth and protruding, snake-like eyes that evoke the imagery of Medusa. What taking off the veil thus can expose is a dangerously teathed, hungry and monstrous female posing the threat of castration. The example of the inverted glove might perhaps be interpreted in this way as well: the deformed glove does away with the fingers, the bride’s unbecoming monstrosity might possibly do away with the phallus.

⁴⁴ The desire to minutely regulate the process of becoming a bride will be discussed in more detail in my practical analysis: Brenda as mad bride indeed tries very hard not to be unbecoming but eventually slips the confines of bridal decorum as her bodily contours dissolve and blood threatens to dirty her wedding dress.

⁴⁵ Even though this character does not emerge in the context of a wedding, she is portrayed wearing a withered, greyish/white dress that evokes a kind of visuality reminiscent of Miss Havisham.



Fig. 2: The bride's true, monstrous nature

That apart from the evil eye it should be monstrous teeth (also Bertha Rochester is described as vampire with red eyes (Brontë 283-4, 294)) lurking under the veil is of course reminiscent of the vagina dentata myth which depicts female genitalia as deadly. In this image the vagina becomes a location of both pleasure and danger, attraction and repulsion, as it is toothed and during intercourse cuts off the penis. Possibly, we could read the glove's fingers turned inside as receptacles that may symbolise the vagina. This reading evokes the idea that the vagina is merely a penis turned inside, which was held in the Renaissance: “[...] the penis was inverted in the female body because of its colder, clammier constitution, whilst in the much warmer male body the same organ was outside the body” (Johnston 79, see also Russo 116-117). Barbara Creed notes that popular representations of the woman as monstrous “[...] define her primarily in relation to her sexuality, specifically the abject nature of her maternal and reproductive functions” (151)⁴⁶. She theorises the woman as *castrator* rather than *castrated*, which obviously poses a serious blow against the Freudian concept of the father as exercising the threat of castration. Drawing out to academic criticism's neglect of an in fact wide array of examples that depict female castrators as a more alarming prospect than the female castrated, she challenges the scholarly preoccupation with the representation of the castrated woman as lack (Creed 152), and thereby undermines the constitution of woman as victim (Creed 7). The phallus as a weapon producing pain, she notes, is penetrating, splitting open, tearing apart, but not castrating. Rather it is the vagina dentata that is able to castrate by incorporating the penis (Creed 157). It is perhaps also this horrifying prospect that the turned glove hints at – accordingly, its deformed, ‘castrated’ shape must not be visualised.

⁴⁶ This aspect will be discussed at length in the practical analysis of Brenda as mad bride.

This monstrous aspect of bride is strongly connected to her ambiguous in-between position, in this example the simultaneous display of both exterior (becoming) and interior (abject) lining of the glove. This semantic overdetermination is a motif that shall be evoked again in section 5, in which a definition of the mad bride as embodying ‘both/and’ instead of ‘either/or’ will be proposed. Creed’s concept of the castrating female can provide a way to account for the monstrosity of the bridal glove turned inside out. The image combines the disappearance of the phallic fingers (thus indicating castration) with the emergence of vaginal receptacles (the reverse/negative of the fingers). We could speak of an incorporation of the phallus connected to the terrifying image of the monstrous, cannibalistic bride emerging when the veil is finally lifted. In this example, we can see how easily the bride’s becoming can turn abject and monstrous, and how powerfully cultural conventions and apparently secure boundaries are put to the test by the overdetermined, ambiguous position of *both/and*. Concluding this discussion of the bride’s becoming as triggered by Vikki Bell’s example of the glove, I would like to again stress the enormous potential that lies in the bride to emerge as a truly transgressive figure that ultimately defies the cultural imperative of bridal confinement. For once, this potential seems to lie in the notion of the bride’s boundary transgressions that may well spill over the socially sanctioned frame of transgressions as expected and wished for (i.e. the single woman stepping into the field of reproduction). Another aspect is the sexual notoriety that may be enacted by the bride within a system that is very much concerned with questions of sexuality and gender. Finally, it is the intrinsic fluidity that the bride, as an identity in the process of becoming, embodies. This fluidity allows for unforeseen transgressions that are considered unruly, unsightly and unbecoming. What is more, the bride’s representation as gory, threateningly vampiric and all-devouring creates a powerful counter-discourse to the usual depictions of bride as objectified, beautiful and contained. She is lacking restraint in her appetite (hence her vampiric ‘nature’), as well as is excessive in the positions she adopts (displaying both interior and exterior, embodying both human and animalistic traits).

4. *Madness as Cultural Construction*

Returning to Clair Hughes' chapter on wedding dresses, we can note that the author does not merely take issue with 'brides', but that the characters she discusses are additionally marked as 'mad' – two designations that obviously inform the object of analysis in this paper, too. This particular type of character ('+bride' and '+mad') is introduced with her discussion of Miss Havisham. Hughes gives the first, rather subtle hint to her 'madness' by referring to "[...] her strange figure" (166) but goes on to explicitly describe her as mad: "Miss Havisham 'goes mad' in white satin [...]" (167). Interestingly, in this first instance of Hughes using the phrase 'going mad', she employs quotation marks, which two lines below she does not do: "[...] Ophelia – another thwarted bride – goes mad in white" (167-168). What do the marks in the first employment of the phrase mean, and what can we make of their absence in the second one?

At first sight, Clair Hughes seems to mark, and thus 'excuse', the rather colloquial register of the phrase 'going mad' in an academic text, which probably need not be explicitly pointed out twice, and thus stands unmarked in the second instance. Alternatively, she might employ the marks in order to stress that what is described is a stereotype. However, what rather is depicted 'stereotypical' by Hughes is not the fact that the characters 'go mad', but that they are *wearing white* when doing so. Would this not mean that the quotation marks are displaced, marking 'madness', instead of the as stereotype exposed 'whiteness'? Perhaps this inconsistent usage of quotation marks might be read as a hint towards the fragility of 'mad' as a category for describing the mental states of fictitious characters, or, alternatively, as a category employed within normative, phallogocentric discourses.⁴⁷ That Miss Havisham should be described as going mad *in quotation marks*, and Ophelia as somehow contrastingly *truly* going mad obviously would be very difficult to maintain. Does Miss Havisham somehow go 'less' mad than Ophelia? And if so, along which lines could we possibly argue in order to describe the difference in the 'scale' of their madness in an academically valid way? These questions supposedly could be answered – perhaps, however, in an unsatisfying, ultimately shallow manner.

⁴⁷ The terms 'bride' and 'mad' are put under quotation marks in order to mark the constructedness of these notions, as well as to draw attention to their employment as abstract categories rather than naturally given, invariably stable phenomena.

Thus the concept of ‘going mad’ is in the context of this paper understood to be just as fluid as is the notion of ‘bride’. Clair Hughes uses the term ‘mad’ a third time in the referred section, namely when she points out to white satin being the only option for portraying these characters, referring to “[...] the great Mad Scene” (169). Used in this collocation, it is clear that ‘mad’ is endowed with notions of artificiality and staged theatricality, rather than denotes a pathological condition – having said this, the concept of ‘mad’ might be viewed (and indeed is widely viewed (see, for instance, Showalter) not as naturally given, but as culturally constructed. As will be argued below, ‘mad’ as in mad bride does not refer to a pathological condition⁴⁸, which is why an extensive analysis of madness in psychological terms is not aimed for. My discussion will be comparably short and touch only upon the most important points – after all, ‘madness’ as a cultural signifier has been excellently and extensively researched. Still, a brief discussion seems indispensable for the endeavour of deconstructing the signifier ‘mad’ and constituting the model of the mad bride that this paper tries to put forward. Furthermore, it might be sensible to tentatively locate ‘mad’ in our collective mind-map as well as in academic discourse.

In cultural studies, ‘madness’ has come to be understood as culturally mediated, produced and naturalised into ontology, which is why analyses have concentrated on *representations* of madness. It should be clear though, and Elaine Showalter has pervasively argued this way, that these representations have exercised a profound impact on human beings within these systems of representation. The various ways in which representations as mad have confined and oppressed people (mostly women) in their lives, however, lie outside the focus of this paper. Considering madness as constructed rather than natural allows for an analysis located in the domain of cultural studies and representation, as well as justifies a definition of ‘mad’ specifically designed for the purposes of this paper.

I have already noted that Clair Hughes uses ‘mad’ when referring to the topos of the ‘Mad Scene’, which indicates that there is something inherently artificial in the concept of madness. In *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter questions the absolute validity of statistics depicting invariably higher numbers of female than male patients in lunatic asylums over the

⁴⁸ Also this paper’s practical analysis will not take issue with a pathologically ‘mad’ bride: Brenda Chenoweth as mad bride rather embodies semantic overdeterminations, i.e. is redundantly and contradictorily marked, which, in the context of this paper constitutes bridal ‘madness’ and is expected to materialise in abject ways.

recorded history of such institutions and sets out to deconstruct these statistical propositions. Showalter particularly focuses on the social confinements women were facing during the respective time periods. What for this paper is of greater interest is her note that the way Ophelia's appearance changed on stage parallels the various shifts in how female insanity was medically defined over time (Showalter 10). Particularly revealing as to the extent that madness seems to rely on theatricality and specific visual conventions is Showalter's discussion of photographs featuring women who were classified insane during their lifetime.

Throughout the Victorian age, Ophelia, "[...] another thwarted bride [...]" (Hughes 167), occupied an especially beguiling position as an emblematic figure of female insanity. That this should be true not only for artists, but also for lunatic asylum superintendents is, to say the least, puzzling. Showalter reports that these authorities used the medium of photography to impose "[...] the conventional Ophelia costume, gesture, props, and expression upon [their female patients]" (92) and suggests that female insanity was strongly defined according to visual conventions (97), which were appropriated and captured via these stylisations and had real effects on women declared mad. For Jean-Martin Charcot, who famously worked on theorising hysteria at the Salpêtrière, the camera was a device that most profoundly shaped definitions of the disorder (Showalter 149). Not only did he use hypnotised women performing hysteria like a spectacle in his lectures (it has been revealed that Charcot's performing patients were specifically trained for their 'shows' (Showalter 148-150)), he also heavily relied on elaborately staged photographs in order to depict various stages of hysteria. The patients' poses captured in Charcot's photographs strike as being quite similar to the then fashionable French acting style and again bear reference to Ophelia, who has become a symbolic "[...] cipher of feminine sexual mystery (Showalter 155)⁴⁹.

A patient named Augustine was notoriously famous for her "[...] ability to time and divide her hysterical performances into scenes, acts, tableaux, and intermissions, to perform on cue and on schedule with the click of the camera" (Showalter 154). In the construction of madness, in particular hysteria, we might detect a similarity to the freak. Obviously produced

⁴⁹ At this point a more obscure sense of the term 'bride' as a verb might indicate a way to align the concepts of 'mad' and 'bride': 'to bride' may denote 'to mince, practise affectedly' (OED, second edition 1989, online version June 2011).

by discursive formations, s/he is not, as frequently maintained, a freak of *nature*, but rather a freak of *culture* (Thomson 10). Madness as culturally constructed and performed seems to heavily rely on visual, even sartorial, conventions. In her account on Victorian management of madwomen's appearance, Elaine Showalter points out to definitions of sanity as "[...] compliance with middle-class standards of fashion" (84). Employing Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, the practical discussion of Brenda as mad bride will consider the pronounced visual, material aspect of 'madness'; previous sections have already pointed out to the gory white wedding dress and the deformed bridal glove as threatening a variety of borders.

Before a definition of the mad bride shall be aimed for, a short note on questions of agency shall be posited. The notion of 'madness' seems to carry an ambiguity comparable to the concept of 'bride' as regards the typical hovering between the status of subject and object. In her canonical essay on female madness, Shoshana Felman argues that "[...] quite the opposite of rebellion, madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation" (8). In her account, 'mad' basically means 'mute', a claim that is illustrated by the silencing of women when labelled 'mad' by men (Felman 14-15). Quite different from an impasse, Elaine Showalter describes 'madness', in particular hysteria, as a potential liberation and feminist rebellion and draws attention to the ways in which the madwoman has become an emblem for feminists (Showalter 4). Similar to 'bride', the signifier 'mad' is thus fraught with ambiguities that seem to justify closer inspection. Building on the various levels of uncertainty that have been detected above, the following paragraphs will aim at a working definition of the mad bride.

5. *The Mad Bride as Unruly Transgressor of Boundaries*

The previous paragraphs have tried to expose the signifiers ‘bride’ and ‘mad’ as ambiguous and fluid. This has been done via deconstructive readings of binary oppositions: gaps and inconsistencies of these dichotomies have been stressed, boundaries have been continuously questioned. The following section is aimed to build on this framework of binaries and will hopefully provide a definition of the mad bride that is useful for further practical analysis. On the one hand, this model will specifically depict the the notion of ‘mad’ not as pathological, but rather as an abstract cipher for transgression of boundaries. This definition of ‘madness’ should enable a more sharpened, descriptive analysis that does not get caught in vague, moralistic evaluations. On the other hand, it will build on the assumption that ‘bride’ is a particularly fluid and elastic notion, which may allow for an analysis of fictitious bridal characters as personification of boundary transgression and which should provide the tools to disentangle the various forms of excess resulting from these transgressions.

The frailty of both the concepts ‘mad’ and ‘bride’ seems to justify a definition of mad bride specifically designed for and accommodating to the purposes of this paper. As has been sketched out in the previous sections, both ideologically invested concepts have taken a particularly wide range of conflicting meaning within various discourses. Thus, unifying both notions in the figure of the mad bride might potentially provide the means to account for a subject position that puts conventional meanings of identity and the body to the test. If attended to, the various subtexts emerging with the mad bride might tell us about standards of femininity, beauty and identity, in particular how these standards are engendered by an ardent preservation of boundaries and a careful elimination of ambiguities – in a further step, the model may indicate ways to probe the limits of just these standards and their boundaries. Taking up the metaphor of binary oppositions (A/B) again, the mad bride seems to embody both polarities A *and* B – this means that she is, on the one hand, redundantly marked and, on the other hand, remarkably difficult to mark, define or capture at all. This applies not only to the binaries sketched out in the previous sections, but can be stretched to an extremely wide field when we consider the specific contexts in which these bridal characters emerge. It shall further be noted that even though the signifier ‘bride’ is regarded as particularly unstable, the conventional confinement within hetero-normative structures of patriarchy that define the boundaries of beauty, normalcy and femininity, shall not be disregarded too easily. An

analysis starting out from within these confines heading towards disruption thereof should prove particularly rewarding as regards the deconstruction of gendered identity and aesthetics.

The mad bride's 'madness' shall thus be defined as (1) the transgression or dilution of boundaries within dichotomies, (2) the embodiment of *both* polarities A *and* B forming a given binary pair, or (3) the subversion of conventionally established hierarchies within binary oppositions A/B (organic/inorganic, subject/object, animate/inanimate, human/animal, young/old etc.) in a non-compliant way⁵⁰. Thus, while binary oppositions provide the base for this definition, a second step necessarily includes the deconstructionist project of questioning their stability. This type of bride does not stay within the socially sanctioned frame of excessive, conspicuous consumption which is connected to the conventional image of the bride, and which is ultimately confined to the category of the beautiful. What is more, she does not merely cross (at times she chooses not to cross at all) the line of single to married woman, as would be the only transgression expected of a conventional bride who lives up to collective romanticised notions of the image.

The mad bride engages in other forms of excess and enters quite different fields in a decidedly unruly manner: she may be both human *and* animal ("[...] the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet" (Brontë 292)), animate *and* inanimate ("She was in the [wedding-dress-]night again, and the doll was herself" (Carter 68)), subject *and* object – the list of binaries might (and, in the practical analysis below, will) be considerably extended. Put in general, abstract terms, she is both A *and* B, thus encompasses incompatible polarities, which creates a position of excess. In the binary logic of Western thought, it is impossible to simultaneously embody both tokens of a binary pair, say black and white, male and female. Identity formation works along the lines of inclusion and exclusion – the mad bride nullifies difference in that she is *both/and* instead of *either/or* and thus generates an extremely inclusive understanding of identity. In this respect, she may be compared to the abject, which similarly partakes in polarised terms, such as subject/object or inside/outside, and consequently cannot be classified either (England 354, Grosz *Volatile* 192). Having said this, the model of the mad bride provides the means to describe the threat posed by the inverted glove in displaying *both* interior *and* exterior.

⁵⁰ The three subdivisions are listed here in order to reflect the quite manifold forms that are possible in the mad bride's construction. A strict differentiation of these variations will, however, not be aimed for.

Analysing the stylisation of the model Shalom Harlow clad in a white dress (or, to be more accurate, in a very full white skirt) in the Summer 1999 Alexander McQueen fashion show, Monika Seidl makes some invaluable observations on bridal identity as ambiguous renegotiation of ontological boundaries that might flesh out the definition of mad bride sketched out above. Bearing in mind the chronological conventions of fashion shows, the white dress' emergence towards the end of the show allows for an interpretation as a bridal dress (Seidl 224). As Monika Seidl argues, by juxtaposing the organic with the inorganic, the collection serves as potent negotiation of the tenet that models are reified dolls "[...] that shift and slip between their origin in inorganic wooden mannequins and their organic presence on the catwalk" (Seidl 224). In particular, said 'bridal' dress embodies this ambiguity: posing and gesturing as a mechanical doll, the model takes her place on a moving turntable. After closely 'inspecting' or, as Monika Seidl puts it, ensnaring her, two phallic robot paintbrushes finally let go of their paint and spray decorative yellow and black lines on the white dress. What is of major interest to the definition of mad bride is that we may witness here a subversion of conventionally established hierarchies and designations of the binary oppositions organic/inorganic, active/inactive and subject/object: "The woman, a human being and a subject is positioned as an object whereas the real objects, the mechanical paintbrushes act as subjects and paint and taint the doll" (Seidl 224). This ensemble further informs the notion of bride as it "[...] emphasises the ambiguous subject-object status of a bride, a status hovering between woman as spectacle and woman as commodity" (Seidl 224).

Arguably, the appeal and affective power of this example stems from the juxtaposition of the organic and the inorganic. This unorthodox installation and the bride's performance accommodates the dilution of the boundary supposedly separating the realms of human/machine, active/passive and introduces a model of bridal body and identity that is inclusive and open, rather than contained and restrained. This bride's 'madness', her inclusivity and excess (marked both '+organic' and '+inorganic'), materialises in a tainted, abjected white dress – this aspect will be discussed in great detail in my reading of Brenda as mad bride, which will strongly employ Kristeva's theory of the abject. Evidently, the dirtied (maybe we would even call it rendered sublime) white dress is a far cry from the clean, mannered body cultivated in the patriarchal ideal of the docile bride. Also we might notice a powerful reconfiguration of the beautiful that is so closely entangled with the ideal of contained and passive femininity. After all, she is not exclusively a frail and passive doll,

“[b]ut once tainted black and yellow, when the deed is done, so to say, the bride marches off triumphantly” (Seidl 224). In my practical analysis of Brenda as mad bride we will encounter yet another genre, serial television, in which bride can be reconfigured as liberatingly inclusive and excessive rather than contained – we will see that also in this example, the bride’s ‘madness’ materialises in (bodily) fluids transgressing the boundaries of the body and threatening to abject the bridal gown, and that the notion of bride as contained and compliant arguably shifts towards triumphant and defiant.

Pursuing the lines of inclusiveness and excess, also the grotesque body, which is “[...] exuberantly and dramatically open and inclusive of all possibilities” (Russo 78), might come to our mind. This inability to differentiate between, say, individual and society, species, classes and genders (Russo 78), creates an effect of uncomfortable and disquieting confusion that is frequently cited in context of the abject as well (England 355). Kristeva’s theory of the abject is in this respect related to Georges Bataille’s account, which depicts the abject as being compounded due to the weakness of prohibition. The abject is thus brought about in a state where exclusion as an imperative act cannot be exercised sufficiently (Keltner 73). With this in mind, societal desires to exclude the abject, as well as the ultimate impossibility to do so, can be explicated.

Extremely inclusive, the prototype of this bridal character is intensely, even redundantly marked in semantic terms, always taking a position of ‘too much’, not only ‘too much of the same’ but ‘merging what should be separate’. Her ontological status is overdetermined in that semantically, she is invested with contradictory qualities – in my analysis of Brenda, these contradictions will concern a variety of realms and address bodily states as well as social designations. This overdetermination is of course to be categorised as hubris as it defies the supposedly God given order of the world⁵¹. Her excessively marked position as stemming from her inclusivity is paradoxically elusive as well, as one could argue that she is also none of the given polarities in the strict sense, since both A and B of dichotomous pairs rely on the exclusion of their opposite in order to exist – in short, the mad bride can be seen to bear a pronounced liberating potential. This study assumes that the mad bride’s excess, her

⁵¹ The mad bride, however, can perhaps not said to be acting in a pretentious God-like way such as a mad scientist, for instance, Dr. Moreau, would be, as it is herself who transgresses the boundaries without any investigative desires in mind.

hyperbolic multiplication as constitutive of her subject position, needs to materialise in one way or the other. Thus, one central aim of this paper is to investigate material manifestations of said transgressions in selected texts⁵².

What goes along with this excessive subject position is an excessive corporeality, which may be considered freakish. Classic carnival freaks can be characterised as having “[...] physiologically anomalous bodies, which visibly deviate from the social norm” (DiCicco 80). Either freaks expose too much, and are thus aligned to excess, or too little, signifying absence – shortly put, their bodies stray (Thomson 1, 5). Arguing along these lines, Mary Russo notes that freakish bodies conflate the authentic and the unconventional (78). What a definition predicated on straying obviously includes, is the notion of boundaries being threatened. Freaks stray across socially acceptable domains and thus violate our system of order on many levels (Heard 36). In this respect, the mad bride can be termed a kind of freak: also her body strays and freakishly crosses dividing lines within dichotomous pairs.

As the mad bride is marked excessively and even redundantly, she may be put in relation to Bataille’s notion of abjection as the lack of imperative competence to exclude in a sufficiently strong way (Keltner 73), as well as with the grotesque as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin. The latter concept is most readily attributed with exaggeration, hyperbolism and excessiveness (Bakhtin 303). What Bakhtin identifies as characteristic of Rabelais’ style might be useful in discussions of the mad bride, too: “[...] superabundance, the tendency to transgress all limits, endless enumerations, and accumulations of synonyms” (306). Applied metaphorically, these notions might indicate the mad bride’s superabundance in attributes that undermine and contradict each other – thus not merely revealing “[...] a great wealth and fullness of meaning [...]” (Bakhtin 309) which would be characteristic of the grotesque, but emerging as decidedly *too* meaningful, which is not considered ‘wealthy’ or ‘full’, but rather ‘wrong’ and ‘foul’⁵³.

⁵² As it is assumed that materialisations of the abject are particularly difficult to realise in serial television, the analysis of this aspect in the reading of Brenda as mad bride will take considerable space.

⁵³ Foulness is in the Kristevan account of the abject considered inherently ambiguous, signifying *both* life and death: “[...] in foulness, an abundance of life is rotting from within” (Berressem 44). This aspect will be touched upon in the practical analysis.

Returning to the apparent proximity of the freak and the mad bride, we may notice that freaks in the traditional sense conjure up images that appear to be quite different from the female characters this paper analyses. Mad brides are neither dwarfs nor giants and do not usually display heavily deformed limbs or ‘wrongly’ conjoined body parts, such as discourses on freaks usually cite (Russo, Thomson). Also, they probably would not be immediately considered to be ready to join a classic freak show. Interestingly enough, some of these characters rather personify what in a normative discourse on beauty would be considered particularly desirable⁵⁴. Going along with the well-established discourses on the bride as epitomising feminine beauty in full blossom, the mad bride compels us to look at her and demands the height of attention (even though she is frequently positioned at the margins). The mad bride thus proves freakish, but in an odd sense: she threateningly strays from conventionally defined lines and borders, but cannot be categorised as freak in a clear-cut way. What Lorraine DiCicco argues in her discussion of the single girl as freak might be applied in this context as well: The mad bride is vacillating between the *norm* (in so far as she partly adheres to conventional standards of beauty, as Brenda initially does in her ardent desire to conform to the white wedding’s rules as a narrative of perfection), and the *deviant* (as manifest in her difference and distance⁵⁵ to the norm, for instance, in her dirtied wedding dress) – more accurately, perhaps, she can be said to encompass and blend *both* the norm *and* the deviant.

Accordingly, we might refer to the mad bride’s ambiguity again: not a freak in the most obvious sense, but still strangely freakish. Not really ‘other’, which can be safely distinguished from ‘self’, and therefore threatening the integrity of identity⁵⁶. This two-folded position of half/half might be called one of a ‘cultural hermaphrodite’⁵⁷, which due to its hybridity is freakish in that it is “[...] not the socially acceptable either/or, but the disturbing

⁵⁴ Or, alternatively, what *once* was beautiful and desirable, as, for example, personified by Bertha Rochester and Miss Havisham – here one could argue, however, that the displaying of fading beauty has a freakish aspect as well.

⁵⁵ Those are the two notions on which the freak show itself depends (DiCicco 83) and which make the freak a spectacular alien.

⁵⁶ In a politically highly problematic stance, Louis-Ferdinand Céline advocates these characteristics to Jews, who for him are very close, indeed nearly ‘self’ and thus symbolise the dissolution of identity (Suchsland 156).

⁵⁷ The concept of hermaphrodite refers in this context not necessarily to the dichotomy woman/man, even though the mad bride’s freakish transgressions might include the dilution of this line as well.

both/and” (DiCicco 85). Elizabeth Grosz identifies ambiguity as the decisive factor of freakishness: “Freaks are those human beings who exist outside and in defiance of the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition” (*Intolerable Ambiguity* 57). What defines freaks is strikingly close to what has been written about the female grotesque as well as to Mary Douglas’ analysis of boundary violations. Of marginal people she observes that they are “[...] left out in the patterning of society [...]” (Douglas 118), which makes them both represent vulnerability and threat. The concept of patterning obviously also includes a system of borders and dividing lines – the freakish and grotesque female defies this system and occupies some place in-between that obstinately refuses to be pinned down.

Also the mad bride might be described as inhabiting an unaccountable in-between position. Bearing in mind the “[...] boundary line between the assumption of male autonomy and proper female submission to and management by a husband [...]” (DiCicco 89), which culture expects women to cross at a certain age, the mad bride apparently is again seen straying. Paradoxically, this straying seems to confine these female characters in a sense – having grown together with her room, Miss Havisham is in bridal expectation for all eternity. Bertha Rochester similarly is locked up: she is literally caged in the attic and occupies a status outside the conventional patterning of society. Being Mr Rochester’s legal wife, while at the same time being deprived the identity of a wife, she might be called “[...] an unnatural, freakish “unwife” [...]” (DiCicco 89), which includes taking the position of both/and, in this case both wife and ‘unwife’ with the additional layer of the in-between (and thus ‘mad’) bride.

Such a position obviously poses a considerable threat of chaos to the existing social system: going in-between, the mad bride refuses to comply with the standards and must consequently be stigmatised and expelled. She seems unable (or rather unwilling) to master what the normative discourse of the wife’s “[...] either/or cultural logic [sustains:] masculine/feminine, manager/managed, owner/owned, power/powerlessness, voice/silence” (DiCicco 92). Considering Bertha Rochester once again, it is striking that even though she is excessively spectacular and uncannily present, in the narrative she is also largely invisible and located at the margins, which again demonstrates the mad bride’s inherent ambiguity. The notion of the mad bride being *confined* to the margins shall be troubled below.

Despite, or because of her in-between position, the spectacular mad bride stands in the centre of attention, her body attracting the gaze (and moral judgement) of her surrounding environment. Gender studies have come to understand the body as an arena where discursive power is negotiated and which is presently governed by self-control. Drawing on the poststructuralist work of Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, it has been put forward that over history an increasing abstraction and internalisation of discursive power, which is identified as a mechanism controlling and regulating the human subject, has been taking place. This specifically involves the shift from the bodily materiality to the psyche as a field where cultural control is exercised. Whereas the pre-modern society regarded the human body as a signifier within a system that enabled to identify, for instance, a burglar because of a missing hand by literally inscribing authority into the human body, from the eighteenth century onwards the disciplinary practices became subtler and finally were reconfigured as self-control. In this epistemological shift, the panoptic gaze plays a paramount role for surveillance (Foucault 155). I would like to suggest that the Western white wedding might be read as Panopticon: having internalised the threat posed by the pristine gown, which so easily reveals violations of normative beauty and the female body (i.e. which makes visible fluids that have traversed the boundaries of the body), the brides accordingly act in ways that supposedly preserve their body (and identity) clean and mannered.

Bodies not adhering to the self-controlling regulations of the normalising discourse are viewed as threat, as is the mad bride's corporeal and behavioural excessiveness, ambiguity and openness. Refusing to conform to the physical ideal, the female grotesque body has proved a valuable tool for feminists:

As a liminal character standing outside the borders of proper cultural behaviour, the female grotesque can examine, criticize, parody and ideally force people to question the supposed naturalness of social expectations, both physical and behavioural (Brown 81-82).

The mad bride certainly defies the imperative of corporeal self-control – but still, as has been argued, her body would not be exposed in a freak show. She may stand outside the borders of culturally approved behaviour, but it is crucial to note that she indeed occupies a place which, as not least Jeffrey A. Brown suggests, is a place where profoundly counter-hegemonic processes can take place.

What has been said in the above paragraph about the mad bride's deviation from utterly freakish bodily manifestations seems to somehow undermine the declared aim of this paper: to look for and assess materialisations of the transgressions performed by the mad bride. But what I am trying to argue is that the mad bride's freakishness is indeed corporeal and materially manifest, if however in a strangely ambiguous fashion that might question the conventionally drawn boundaries of the body. Indeed, my main assumption is that, if the mad bride is, due to her fluid subject position, transgressing boundaries and thus threatening the cultural system of patterns, this condition must be reflected in the (violent) deformation and abjection of her body and dress.

This chapter has referred to a variety of theories and concepts. Apart from Kristeva's abject, the grotesque and the freakish have been evoked. On the whole, this paper intends to regard Kristeva's theory of the abject as its guiding framework as her account seems most powerful in unravelling identity as coherent, stable and finished. While the theory of the grotesque originates in a quite specific context, the carnival, the abject transcends all contexts, as well as, due to its ambiguity, includes the possibility of sublimation. The main reason for privileging the concept of the abject as methodological lens is its more pronounced aspect of ambiguity. Mary Russo does subtly hint at the notion of ambiguity in her observation on bodily detritus, which so strongly resonates in the grotesque, as being separated out *predominantly* with terror and attraction (2); Mikhail Bakhtin notes of bodily excretions that they degrade as well as relieve (335). Ultimately, the theory of the abject is more interested in the ambiguous move that characterises this expulsion of corporeal matter, it even starts out from the notion of ambiguity. In its most powerful moments, the theory of the abject provides the means to read the affective – and unlike the freakish, the abject is unbearably close. The abject permeates all categories, including psychological ones – and, unlike Mary Douglas's account, is not confined to sociology and anthropology. Still, Russo's ways of taking advantage of the grotesque and appropriating it for a female identity that defies patriarchal order, invaluable inform this paper, too.

6. Kristeva's *Abject Revisited*

6.1. *Excess: Spilling Over*

Having outlined a working definition of the mad bride, it seems sensible to again evoke aspects of Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. The following paragraphs will focus on specific points that the model laid out above has touched, and by doing so aims to make explicit the ways in which the abject may help us to interpret the mad bride.

As has been argued, the mad bride is excessive in her overabundance and ambiguity. Kristeva's theory of the abject appears to be similarly marked with excess. Her writing seems to be constantly spilling over limits, creating a chain of superlatives most often linked to explicitly graphic examples of the abject. Embarking on a phenomenological tour de force, she describes food loathing as "[...] perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection" (Kristeva 2)⁵⁸ and the corpse⁵⁹ as "[...] the utmost of abjection" (Kristeva 4), "[...] the most sickening of wastes, [...] a border that has encroached upon everything" (Kristeva 3), as well as defilement as "[...] the trans-linguistic spoor of the most archaic boundaries of the self's clean and proper body" (Kristeva 73). The corpse as "[...] the nonhuman doppelgänger threatening the borders of the human" (Seet 145) is abject as it is inherently ambiguous (nonhuman, though a doppelgänger of the human, thus pointing towards the annihilation of meaning), as well as disruptive in its threat to human borders. Many critics furthermore stress that the corpse's putrefying flesh painfully forces the subject to vividly envisage its inevitably fragile corporeality (see, for example, McAfee 47) – other than "[i]n the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance [...]" (Kristeva 3), the subject cannot understand, react to, or accept the corpse. This is a somewhat different conception than Maurice Blanchot's notion of the cadaver as its own *image*, its ultimate resemblance, which dissolves the clear-cut dichotomy of life and death and combines corpse and beauty (Seidl *Beautiful*).

⁵⁸ Food loathing is an elementary form of abjection because in spitting out food, the child, which has not yet acquired language, presents itself as separate, independent being that no longer passively incorporates what it is proffered (Suchsland 123).

⁵⁹ Whereas Kristeva puts her emphasis on the corpse, Céline "[...] locates the ultimate of abjection – and thus the supreme and sole interest of literature – in the birth-giving scene [denoting] the height of bloodshed and life [...]" (Kristeva 155).

Accordingly, also discussions of her text mirror Kristeva's discourse of excess and similarly hinge on the superlative. S.K. Keltner, for instance, describes Kristeva's psychoanalytic account of the abject as "[...] the *most* violent moment of subjective diachrony" which "[...] *always* threatens to gain power again [which is why] abjection is my *very* border, i.e., it is a *ceaseless* defense against nondifferentiation" (46, emphasis mine). Ultimately, excess lies at the core of both the abject and the mad bride – as Hanjo Berressem maintains, bodily exchanges with the environment become abject when they "[...] get out of bounds [and] become uneconomic/excessive [and] unstoppable flows and fluxes [...]" (43). This last quote shows that excessive fluidity is a concept of fundamental importance within abjection. Bodily fluids occupying an in-between space of neither subject nor object most often are abject. Also the constitution of the mad bride is closely related to these abject fluids as quite frequently her transgressions (in the form that her body and dress are abjected) include blood or other corporeal material – this aspect will play a paramount role in my reading of Brenda as mad bride.

6.2. Materiality as the First Site of Abjection

What for the purpose of this paper is of enormous interest in regard to Kristeva's theory of abjection, is its strong material aspect: Hanjo Berressem aptly notes that even though abjects are essentially different from objects, they "[...] are extremely, one might even say excessively material" (21). Graphically, Kristeva works with carnal sensations evoked by specifically materialised abjects in order to develop her arguments. Describing in quite personal terms her loathing of a skin of milk, she states:

I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire (Kristeva 2-3).

Alongside this excessiveness goes a certain degree of materiality: obviously the quite graphic examples Kristeva provides are considerably grounded in bodily, material matters, which at times seems to be viewed as somewhat trivial by various scholars. Ruth Baumert notes that "[a]t first sight abjection seems to demand materiality [...]" (199), only to reassure us that by transposing abjection to literature, which Baumert calls "[...] a brilliant shift [...]", it can take "[...] *less material and more subversive* forms" (199, emphasis mine). While it is

perfectly clear that one strength of Kristeva's theory is its wide applicability (including the analysis of violated discursive and literary norms, towards which Baumert draws our attention (199)), it shall be stressed that in this paper, while acknowledging boundary transgressions as an inherent aspect of the theory, materiality is not some aspect that is to be relegated to the first sight (see Baumert's quote above), but rather is treated as the first *site* of transgression, and thus invariably entangled with 'madness' in the sense used in this paper. In fact, it is an essential aspect of the present investigation to work with the premise that the abject embodiment of the composite, thus what makes the bridal characters be perceived as 'mad', needs to materialise in one form or the other. The materiality inherent in Kristeva's theory is therefore regarded as a guiding principle rather than dispensable trivia and the subsequent practical analysis will continuously assess abject materialisations. Hanjo Berressem takes issue with Kristeva's reconceptualization of materiality, which he views as performing a shift from the Lacanian 'dead materiality' to what he calls 'intelligent materialism'. In this paper, materiality of the abject in its most bodily form accordingly is understood as feeding and enabling subversive transgressions. Thereby, the transgressions of boundaries are viewed as essentially constitutive of the abject. My focus of practical investigation firstly is directed at materialisations of the abject, and secondly includes assessments of this abject materiality in regard to the transgression of boundaries and the meanings for the mad bride's subject position and identity.

6.3. Essentialism, Maternity, Controversy

As Kristeva's discourse keeps recurring on the maternal (among others, Russo points out to this preoccupation with the mother, (64)), critical engagement with her theory of the abject predominantly has taken issue with this topic. As discourses of maternity will feature in my practical analysis, this controversy shall be discussed briefly. On the one hand, scholars embark on damning Kristeva's account as undermining feminist projects by trivialising real violence against real women, or, alternatively, as reducing women to their reproductive function (Tatum 11). This line of criticism all too often seems to fall prey to a conflation of patriarchy's oppressive institution of motherhood and the grounding of Kristeva's account in maternal relations. On the other hand, critics see the potential in Kristeva's theory to radically unsettle the very order that has produced said institution in the first place. While this paper is

more aligned to the latter strand of criticism, assaults of trivialising the abjection of real women as well as of essentialism should perhaps not be dismissively ignored.

Given the Kristevan theory's apparent foundation in the body and materiality⁶⁰, or what is termed the theory's "[...] ambiguous position towards biology" (Gutiérrez-Albilla 67), particularly her account of mothering, it is not entirely surprising that it should have been criticised for being essentialist. In an article tellingly titled 'Against abjection', Imogen Tyler posits that "[...] rarely has a concept as influential as abjection been consistently misrecognized as *feminist in origin*" (82). Apparently, Kristeva's theory involves a transcendence of conventionally termed 'feminist' disciplinary discourses, which might pose problems for a theory that is most readily applied within feminist agendas. As Bettina Schmitz points out, the notion of maternity in connection to essentialism is the most heavily critiqued, as well as the most hotly debated aspect of Kristeva's work (182).

Recapitulating the importance of the maternal in the theory of abjection seems valuable at this point – in particular because this paper's practical analysis will investigate Brenda's leaking maternal body. Kristeva theorises that in order to constitute itself as a subject, to acquire a 'clean' body, the infant has to abject the maternal body. This includes a violent (though incomplete and 'clumsy') rupture from the pre-Symbolic unity of mother and child that was characterised by idyllic bliss before any sense of lack. This blissful state, however, is deceiving as it is obviously necessary for the subject in order to live, to remove its bonds with this other body. At the moment in which the mother is no longer part of the subject's own body, still not yet fully separate (thus when the union has reached a point of in-between ambiguity), the mother is abjected. Here Kristeva basically follows the psychoanalytic canon, which sees the birth of the human being as premature, occurring long before the infant can function independently (Keltner 42). What differentiates Kristeva's account on what is inevitable for the subject in order to secure societal order from conventional psychoanalytic approaches, is her insistence on matricide (the severing of the confusion between the maternal body and the infant's body), instead of the Freudian patricide so prominent within the Oedipal constellation.

⁶⁰ Bettina Schmitz sees Kristeva's approach as indeed keeping a relation to the body without, however, positioning this relation in absolute terms (190).

Among secondary material on Kristeva's theory of the abject, there can be identified a certain line of criticism that features a worry about and a defence of 'the maternal body'. Imogen Tyler criticises that within Kristeva's theory the "[...] 'mother' cannot exist as a subject in her own right but only as the subject's perpetual other" (85), and, employing a quite personal tone, states that the Kristevan concept of matricide as the subject's necessary step towards individuation "[...] takes [her] breath away each time [she] read[s] it" (Tyler 87). Tyler lets her critique culminate in the suggestion that the theory "[...] legitimates the abjection of maternal subjects" (Tyler 87), by which she literally worries about physical violence against pregnant women. Anna Smith strikes a similar chord and stresses that she is "[...] struck by the force of hatred and aggression that is directed at the maternal body" (160) in Kristeva's account and reveals that she understands this 'aggression' as directed against her own identity as a woman (Smith 160).

An explanation for these personally grounded criticisms (that partly are difficult to reconcile also with theoretical strands such as strategic essentialism) might be found in the text of one of the aforementioned critics herself. Anna Smith suggests that it might be Kristeva's "[...] ambivalent investment in phenomenology and personal narrative [that makes *Powers of Horror*] so vulnerable, ironically, to feminist critique" (156-157)⁶¹. It seems plausible that Kristeva's frequent use of the first person voice, as well as the frequent employment of a 'lyrical' tone could trigger strikingly personal responses. Revealingly, both scholars refer to their own bodily reaction to Kristeva's text: 'takes my breath away' and 'I am immediately struck', which might be read as stressing the immediate force of the essay's inherent bodily aspect, as well as its subject matter, the abject, even more⁶².

Drawing on the invaluable insight that the 'maternal body' actually is a phantasm (Tatum 24), some scholars argue that the representation of this very body *is* a site of ambivalence and the dilution of borders: the maternal body keeps growing to spectacular

⁶¹ Kristeva's phenomenological-psychoanalytic description of abjection forms the beginning of *Powers of Horror* – Kristeva herself calls her first chapter 'Approaching Abjection' a "[...] preliminary survey [...], phenomenological on the whole [...]" (31) – a major part of her text is made up of an account of the literary history, as well as an assessment of the social and historical situation of abjection (Keltner 39).

⁶² In her landmark study about the monstrous feminine, Barbara Creed notes the immediateness of horror films which the spectator may experience with similar altered bodily states: viewers often describe watching such films with phrases such as "It scared the shit out of me" or "It made me feel sick". (3). The horrific visualisation of bodily wastes – be it staged in a horror film or discussed in Kristeva's theory of the abject – may affect physical states.

proportions and is leaking to an unusual extent (giving birth and afterbirth, lactating). Another violation of borders is that the maternal body is not one, but hosts an other inside, resulting, from a phallogocentric point of view, in the mother as the ultimate other (Magennis 92-93, Tatum 12). Kristeva argues for a special place of the maternal corporeality, speaking of “[...] the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body” (Kristeva 54). Again, this kind of maternity is, along notions such as femininity, father, phallus, not to be confused with empirically verifiable bodies or forms of family, but rather describes phantasms and images of these notions. Taking this observation a step further, it should be clear that Kristeva’s account of femininity and maternity does not suggest any need for women to be maternal, nor does it maintain that women would share any given, natural maternal qualities whatsoever (Suchsland 112). In my subsequent practical analysis that partly discusses maternal corporeality, these latter remarks shall form my theoretical framework.

6.4. Transgressions: “[...] abjection is above all ambiguity”⁶³

The mad bride embodies ambiguity – in fact, this notion largely determines her unruliness. It has also been numerously pointed out that abjects are dreadful because they pose a threat to the subject’s borders. In this section, this aspect shall be addressed again in order to reinforce the mad bride’s proximity to the abject. For once, the abject’s ambiguity is due to a topological indecisiveness:

Designating simultaneously a “border” ([Kristeva] 3), a space of “in-between” (4), and something that turns the subject “inside out” (3), [abjects] introduce a fundamental ambiguity and ambivalence into the subject’s world that threatens it in its very constitution as a coherent psychic aggregate (Berressem 23).

Each of the possibilities of what form the abject can take enumerated above (border, in-between and inside out) points to a dangerous position: either on the edge to alterity, ambiguously neither self nor other, or fundamentally subverted.

We might at this point recall the mad bride’s topological position. She is also located in-between and at the margins, thus occupies a liminal, what in postcolonial theory would be

⁶³ (Kristeva 9)

termed ‘third’, space. It is important to note that it is *space* the mad bride occupies, or, one might even say, reclaims and conquers, and thus divests of the popular notion of confinement and passivity commonly attached to the bride. That a certain potential of power lies in such a position is particularly obvious in the abject, which draws its affective force from exactly such an ambiguous, seemingly subordinate position.

Also in chronological terms, the abject is truly ambiguous (Berressem 23ff). Even though the abject points back to a state prior to the constitution of the subject, painfully reminding it of its earlier unity with the maternal body, it continues to haunt the subject long after it has been individualised (Smith 23). Not only that, the abject is vital for the continuation of the subject, securing its very (future) borders. Also that every encounter with the abject occurring after the rupture from the mother’s body is considered a re-enactment of the primal instance of abjection (thus, that the subject is abjecting the mother in retrospect again and again (Kutzbach and Mueller 8)), is confusing layers of time. In the example of the corpse, the abject similarly points towards the subject’s inevitable annihilation in the future, “[t]hat elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present [...] (Kristeva 4). Considering chronology in semantic terms, the abject thus again takes a position of excess: it is marked with ‘+prior to’, ‘+simultaneous with’ and ‘+after’ the constitution of the subject. At this point we might recall what has been said about the bride’s identity as in the process of becoming and, in particular, the extent to which this process is fraught with (chronological) ambiguities.

The last chapter of this thesis offers an exemplary account of the mad bride, a practical reading of constructions and representations of Brenda Chenoweth as mad bride in the *Six Feet Under* episode ‘A Coat of White Primer’. Drawing on the framework that has been developed in the previous sections, my critical interpretation is guided by the following research questions: How exactly is the mad bride’s subject position constructed as ambiguous and in what ways do such constructions disrupt notions of the fixed and stable Cartesian identity? In what ways can the mad bride’s abject body be read as informing her subject position and the interrelated transgression of boundaries? How can the mad bride’s ambiguous subject position be shown to surface in the (materialised or imagined) abject deformation of her body and dress?

Bearing in mind Kristeva's graphic examples of the abject, instances of abject materiality will be spotted and assessed. These instances can be the explicit visualisation of bodily fluids and the deformations of the body, or the mere evocation of these images. On a material level, the instances of the abject may concern also dress as an extension of the body. Dress operates at the 'dangerous' margins of the body, where the boundary between self and non-self can be severely shattered due to traversing bodily fluids. However, also less 'straight-forward' abjects may be taken under consideration: as the abject is defined as "[w]hat does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4), the subsequent practical analysis also touches upon formal disruptions as instances of an abject text. The classification of a given abject will be made via the deconstructive vernacular of Kristeva's theory, as well as by a close inspection of semantic layers, looking for redundancy and ambiguity. Thus, I will question what exactly makes abject matter abject, and what produces a position of excess, i.e. how the mad bride is constructed according to the principle *both/and* rather than *either/or*.

Aiming for a specific focus in my critical analysis, I have decided to closely work with the model of the mad bride presented in chapter 5. For this reason, I do not intend to restrict my practical discussion to bridal madness as pathologically insane. My major primary text (*Six Feet Under*, episode 'A Coat of White Primer') accordingly features a bride who is not necessarily to be considered 'mad' as in the sense of 'mentally ill'. In order to provide an additional layer to a discussion of the mad bride, the selection of this example consciously departs from those Clair Hughes mentions in her analysis – however, the characters she mentions will be evoked when necessary.

7. “No matter how many white veils you put on, honey”: Reading Brenda Chenowith as Mad Bride

Produced by US premium cable television network Home Box Office (HBO), the generically hybrid ‘dramedy’ *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) focuses on a (dysfunctional) family of funeral directors, the Fishers. After the sudden death of patriarch Nathaniel, the business is run by the brothers Nate and David, while their mother Ruth and their sister Claire are living in the funeral home. The narrative thread most relevant for the subsequent analysis concerns eldest son Nate and his romantic relationships. In season 2, Nate and Brenda’s first engagement is broken off due to both partners’ sexual encounters outside the relationship. While Brenda’s promiscuous adventures are eventually termed an addiction, Nate’s night with his former roommate Lisa ends in her pregnancy. Nate and Lisa’s (dysfunctional) marriage – their daughter Maya is three months old when they marry – is as abruptly ended as it started by Lisa’s (possibly violent) death in drowning in season 3, which leads Nate back into Brenda’s arms (season 4).

Brenda, who will be analysed as mad bride below, probably cannot be classified pathologically insane. However, we know about Brenda’s childhood being spent under constant psychological observation. Furthermore, the companion to the series reveals in an (of course fictional) extract from *Charlotte Light and Dark*, a published account on Brenda’s mental health, that she actually did spend some time in a mental institution as a child (Wright *Charlotte* 61-65). Also, comments on her range from “[...] a bit crazy” (Chambers 37) to online discussions on her promiscuity as indeed conforming to common definitions of ‘mad’, such as being “[...] uncontrolled by reason or judgement; [...] extravagantly or wildly foolish; ruinously imprudent [and] lacking in restraint; (wildly) unconventional in demeanour or conduct” (OED, second edition 1989, online version January 2012). In the episode under discussion ‘A Coat of White Primer’, the notion of Brenda as crazy, unrestrained and unconventional is openly discussed as thwarting her aspirations to embody a bride in a conventional ‘happily-ever-after’ moment. Reading Brenda as mad bride, the following analysis will specifically concentrate on Brenda’s ‘madness’ as being constituted by various boundary transgressions, and will investigate abject materialisations of this madness, which emerge when she adopts the role of bride.

‘A Coat of White Primer’, the first episode of the last season (5:1), focuses on Brenda’s miscarriage and her marrying Nate two days later. It features a distressed Brenda who

struggles with identity issues (“[The wedding] was a pathetic attempt to become something I’m not [...]”), as well as the apparent incompatibility of wearing a white wedding dress and being unable to adhere to cultural standards of the contained female body. In addition, the patriarchal ethos of the angelic mother⁶⁴ frames an assessment of Brenda’s perceived unruliness. Brenda’s unease reaches a climax on her wedding day in a confrontation with Lisa’s bridal-dress-wearing ghost. The subsequent analysis will trace representations of Brenda as mad bride by outlining her multiple transgressions of culturally constructed boundaries. Applying the definitional framework of the mad bride, these transgressions will be examined via the concepts of ambiguity and excess. It is further assumed that the mad bride’s subject position will materialise in abject ways. Applying Kristeva’s theory of the abject, an analysis of these bodily manifestations shall indicate models of identity as multiple and ambiguous, and possibly trouble the fixed and invariably stable Cartesian self.

The episode starts with a corruption of form⁶⁵ and genre conventions, as well as introduces the theme of ambiguity and uncanny proximity. After the ‘cold open’⁶⁶, the episode starts with seemingly raw footage of what shall look like an amateur home video filmed with a camcorder. It depicts the final preparations for a wedding via a bunch of clichés: applying the pin to the groom’s shirt, asking for motherly advice on a happy marriage, looking for the rings. These scenes are stylised in the typically provisional feel of an amateur film, complete with unstable images, aggressive jump cuts (Yale film studies), clumsily framed close-ups, a low definition format and a voice-over that plays on private jokes and double entendre: David tries to manipulate Nate’s pin, and eventually asserts: “It won’t prick”, Claire, the presumable camera holder, ironically comments: “Looks like Nate may have to get married without a prick”⁶⁷.

⁶⁴ This discursive construction is circulating in our cultural narrative and runs parallel to the abjection of the maternal, leaking body.

⁶⁵ The whole episode plays with stylistic devices of montage: apart from the amateur wedding video, black-and-white photographs are continuously inserted into the filmic flow.

⁶⁶ The series’ obligatory opening sequence in which someone’s death is shown. It often sets the tone for the ensuing episode.

⁶⁷ This seemingly innocent joke actually tells us more about hidden, dark and sinister meanings than viewers might realise on the surface. The allusion to Nate as castrated groom on the one hand evokes the idea of Nate making a terrible mistake and, on the other hand, indicates the leitmotif of Nate’s character: loss.

The viewers are led to believe that it is Nate and Brenda's wedding⁶⁸ they are watching. Conventionally, we expect the new season to start with Nate and Brenda's wedding and the emergence of Brenda as the bride: the previous episode, the last episode of season 4, has featured Nate's proposal and Brenda's acceptance thereof. The episode clearly plays with these expectations and thwarts them when the home video provides the first glimpse of something deeply troubling any sense of order, indeed, a "[...] massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness [...]" (Kristeva 2): the wedding guests do not seem to match the feast and we uncomfortably realise that something about this wedding is not right, that this wedding profoundly shatters and undermines what we "[...] take for granted as normal, rational and secure" (Wisker *Don't Look Now* 26).

At this point we might realise that not only bodily, graphic materiality can be abject, but also, as Julia Kristeva argues, the subversion of genre conventions may be. This is the case when a text's narrative is challenged (for instance, due to the breaching of allegedly secure boundaries), and continues nevertheless, albeit displaying a changed makeup and a shattered linearity (Kristeva 141)⁶⁹ – here, Alexander McQueen's mechanical 'bride' might come to our mind: the chronology of a fashion show is certainly evoked, but what we are confronted with towards the end of the show is no classical radiant bride but a complex negotiation of the bride's ambiguous status. Also, though triggering respective associations, the model is not wearing a wedding dress proper, but rather a full white skirt, the belt of which is reconfigured as neckline (Seidl 224). Such an 'abject' text potentially expresses "[...] the sudden irruption of *affect*" (Kristeva 53, emphasis in the original), which can note in the McQueen show, as well as in these opening scene. Indeed, the viewer's⁷⁰ sense of order – at least this one's – is severely corrupted when what is seen undermines what is expected: We see Carol, dead Lisa's former boss, rushing by⁷¹ and are puzzled by Lisa's sister Barb frantically asking for David

⁶⁸ This ambiguity is made possible due to the series' leap of seven months between the end of season 2 and the beginning of season 3, which means that the audience has never actually seen Nate and Lisa's wedding.

⁶⁹ Even though these forms of abjection do not form the main interest of this paper, it seems relevant to point out to them at this point as this violation of the genre conventions strongly informs the episode's narrative and establishes an uncanny proximity between two brides. Furthermore, the theme of ambiguity is introduced.

⁷⁰ The spectator's unease is already heightened due to the uncomfortable form of the video.

⁷¹ As it turns out, Carol provides the motto for Brenda's wedding by feeding her anxiety as to being unable to conform to romantic standards of femininity, 'naturalness' and maternity: "I love how weddings just erase the past, like a coat of white primer. Slap a veil on her and the biggest slutbag on the planet becomes a fresh-faced ingénue".

and the rings. Nervously, we follow the breathless movement of the camera, which basically is camera monitor Claire's subjective point of view. We run with Claire, trying to cope with the jerky, hectic frames that do not ever let us rest and integrate us into the action from the beginning. Claire is following bridesmaid Barb into the room where the bride is sitting in front of the mirror, waiting for the ceremony to get started.

In a troubling disruption of the conventional, the bride to be revealed to the audience is Lisa, who, at this point, has long been discovered dead. She is contemplating her present feelings, uttering a line that will be echoed in a later scene: "[...] every moment of my life has led up to this one [...]". In fairy tale fashion (Heywood 204), a radiantly smiling Lisa uncritically voices common beliefs upheld upon true love and kismet by stating that she feels "[...] like all of it makes sense, like this is the destiny that's been waiting for [her]". Conforming to the conventional notions of the Cartesian self that have been outlined in 1.1., Lisa communicates her bridal identity as stable, embedded in a higher order, perhaps even strengthened and confirmed by the wedding. All of a sudden, the camera pans out to pregnant Brenda, who is sitting on a couch and casually watching the wedding video on screen, while Lisa's utterances get the sound quality of distant, recorded voices. The formally and narratively conspicuous, even disturbing wedding video poses a considerable confusion at the very beginning of the episode that is solved quite late. I would like to argue that it serves three (interconnected) functions, all of which seem relevant for Brenda's representation as mad bride.

First, the wedding video makes it clear from the start that the viewers are going to face "[...] what disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4), thus it serves as an introduction to the abject and its affective powers. Second, Brenda, the bride of flesh and blood, and Lisa, the televised and now dead bride, are simultaneously contrasted and linked to one another, as they are bound together by an uncanny proximity that troubles straight-forward identification. Also, a long-known narrative of bride, ambiguity and uncanny proximity is evoked, immersing the episode in a well-established tradition: similar to *Rebecca* or *Jane Eyre*, 'A Coat of White Primer' features a (dead) first wife whose overarching presence is uncanny and whose proximity is unbearable. Like those canonical texts, it subtly proposes the visual merging of two brides' identities (Wisker *Dangerous* 93) by raising our expectations to see Brenda as bride. The uncanny disruption of a narrative by troubling bridal identity along visual lines is well-known: when before the marriage ceremony Jane Eyre sees "[...] a robed

and veiled figure, so unlike [her] usual self that it almost seem[s] the image of a stranger” (Brontë 286), we “[...] for a moment [...] are unsure whether Jane sees herself or the unknown woman of her dream [i.e. Bertha]. It is at all events not a reassuring moment” (Hughes 164). Also ‘A Coat of White Primer’ features such a not reassuring, indeed vehemently disrupting moment in which we can get a glimpse of the affective power the abject may have: once thought familiar, it suddenly emerges and “[...] harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either.” (Kristeva 2).

Third, Brenda is portrayed as an over-anxious, perfectionist *bridezilla*⁷² who picks on every last detail of the wedding, and even does not restrain from watching the video of Nate marrying Lisa⁷³, just to make sure she does not “[...] do the same thing in some weird way, and make everyone uncomfortable”. Brenda is aware that in a “[...] society that values boundaries over continuity and separateness over sameness” (Creed 29), what would people make uncomfortable is a too close proximity between the dead and the living bride. Paradoxically, Brenda’s realisation of this danger just puts her on even more dangerous grounds: her ardent desire to establish a position contrasting Lisa’s is undermined exactly by the wedding video. While watching the video should enable Brenda to draw boundaries and prevent sameness, it ultimately aligns her to Lisa in an uncanny way. What should protect her from displaying too many similarities constructs her as being on the verge to copy Lisa’s pronounced controlling ways, as similar to Lisa as Panopticon in marriage (Johnson 28, Heywood 207), Brenda displays aspects of the monstrous wedding planner (*bridezilla*) who indulges in an “[...] almost military precision implied in wedding planning [...]” (Currie 416).

Brenda’s heightened anxiety about the wedding being too similar to Nate and Lisa’s and her insistence on it being ‘perfect’, i.e. according to hetero-normative social conventions and the respective boundaries, might be read as pointing towards a bad ending. Clair Hughes’ argument that too careful descriptions of wedding dresses in fiction herald disaster might be extended to this example as well. Brenda tries too hard in preventive measures and Nate’s

⁷² “A woman thought to have become intolerably obsessive or overbearing in planning the details of her wedding” (OED, second edition 1989, online version January 2012)). Via the ending *-zilla* (derived from the artificial monster *Godzilla*), the neologism jokingly refers to the potential monstrosity of brides. This stereotype is frequently exploited in various popular discourses.

⁷³ Lisa’s uncanny presence in the living room has to trigger emotional turmoil given that Nate has found out only very recently that Lisa possibly has been murdered by her brother-in-law Hoyt – as a reference to this horrible discovery, a heated conversation between Lisa and Hoyt is indeed recorded on the wedding tape.

attempts to calm her down only provoke bridezilla Brenda's nervous over-attentiveness: "It's gonna be totally different, Bren." "I want it to be perfect." It's already perfect, even if it rains, everybody gets soaked." "That's why I got the tent.", "Even if the band sucks and the food is rancid." "That's why we're having only hors d'oeuvres". We can note that Brenda's vision of a perfect wedding is a sanitised and artificially clean one that makes every effort not to have people soaked, thus maintaining the illusion of the non-leaky, solid body, as well as to clinically exclude rancidness⁷⁴. In a nutshell, her vision is one that seems to adhere to hetero-normative dogmas of the perfect 'white' wedding, in which 'white' also means 'unsoiled' and in which the boundary separating dirtiness from cleanliness must not be transgressed or diluted. Seeking to establish an environment of sanitised cleanliness and orderliness, it is a vision firmly engrained within the Symbolic order and might be read as a re-enactment of the subject's initial abjection and expulsion of "[...] what is not part of its clean and proper self" (McAfee 49), or more specifically, as a disavowal of the maternal, female body "[...] as site of boundary-less chaos [...]" (Ringrose and Walkerdine 233).

This stereotypically committed, slavishly perfectionist and monstrously 'bridal' Brenda seems a far cry from earlier seasons' 'unconventional' (Heywood 211-13) Brenda who refused to cling to culturally constructed boundaries of various kinds. In season 2, she proposes to Nate with her grandfather's fraternity ring ('The Invisible Woman' 2:5), which Leslie Heywood interprets as a "[...] queer inversion of the usual grandmother's engagement ring [...]" (203), and asks him to be his *wife*. Thus, she disassociates herself from the traditional gender roles supplied by patriarchal systems and, by appropriating the existing models in an ironic way, exposes the strictly dichotomous gender roles as a cliché. In season 4, she mockingly calls her then boyfriend Joe⁷⁵ "just a little *bride*" when he excitedly fantasises about having new bedding in their new home ('Terror Starts at Home 4:6). In marking both her lovers '+feminine', Brenda troubles the boundaries supposedly setting apart the realms of femininity and masculinity, of bride/wife and groom/husband, respectively, and

⁷⁴ Food loathing, "[...] perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (Kristeva 2) may occur because "[...] orality signifies a boundary of the self's clean and proper body" (Kristeva 75). Representing the natural, thus the other to the subject's social condition, it threatens to disintegrate the body's cleanness and properness. Brenda attempts to counteract the threat posed by food by having *only* hors d'oeuvres, a form of food that, due to its restrained portions and French connotations, might be read as being invested with cultural refinement.

⁷⁵ With Joe, Brenda considers settling down and having a baby – these plans are thwarted after Joe learns about her affair with Nate.

presents an identity model that embraces ambiguity and plurality, thus, one that comes close to what in this paper is termed ‘mad’. This confusion of gender roles and their accompanying narratives seems to directly contrast with the present Brenda, who apparently is so keen on keeping up separating boundaries of cleanliness and, as will be argued below, femininity.

Both visions of her effeminated partners pursuing to conform to heterosexual conventions of romantic intimacy and closeness⁷⁶, Nate as her wife, Joe as a little bride, used to literally suffocate Brenda: when engaged to Nate she dreams about him showing his affection by cramming a pillow in her face (2:6 ‘In Place of Anger’); when going to buy new bedding for her and Joe’s future home, she hallucinates that the shelves holding packed pillows start to tremendously shake, causing packages of pillows fall around her (4:6 ‘Terror Starts at Home’)⁷⁷. A supposedly secure and comforting place, home, is thus portrayed as terrifying and potentially killing Brenda, and the line separating love and destruction is severely shattered. Not only does this show a collapse of supposedly secure boundaries in that the familiar uncannily turns against her (the confines of home traitorously threaten to engulf Brenda), but also portrays Brenda, who shatters this boundary in her (day)dreaming, as distancing herself from a confining place marked as ‘feminine’.

According to the show’s conventions developed over the first four seasons, Brenda seems to embody cool detachment that is commonly ascribed to masculinity, rather than displays the femininely coded desire to commit to monogamous intimacy and to form a heterosexually reproductive bond. Also, she is notoriously unwilling to accept designations as loving and feminine. When in the first season Nate awkwardly introduces her as his girlfriend⁷⁸, she replies: “I prefer the term fuck puppet” (‘An Open Book’ 1:5), a relatively unmotivated line Samuel A. Chambers deems a ‘psycho comment’ that once again lets Brenda “[...] come across as a bit crazy” (37), while Sally R. Munt celebrates it as a glorious parry (274)⁷⁹.

⁷⁶ Joe wants to literally be bound to Brenda’s bed during intercourse.

⁷⁷ This link has also been pointed out by Merri Lisa Johnson (32-33).

⁷⁸ They unexpectedly bump into David and his boyfriend Keith in a restaurant.

⁷⁹ The representation of Brenda as possibly insane is quite frequent, in episode 2:9, for instance, Brenda herself voices this prospect after an overwhelming sexual encounter outside her relationship with Nate: “What if I’m losing my shit. What if this is the beginning of some serious mental illness, you know”. Also, Brenda can be compared to Freud’s famous patient Dora. Erin MacLeod stresses that Brenda’s childhood years spent in psychotherapy and panoptical observation were turned into a book, *Charlotte Light and Dark*, which is supposed to provide a full account on her psyche.

Either way, it shows Brenda as ironically distancing herself from the label ‘girlfriend’, which bears a somewhat greater proximity to the common female roles of ‘bride’ or ‘wife’ than the antisocial and unruly ‘fuck puppet’ that seems to stress cold mechanical physicality of sexual intercourse, rather than romantic spirituality supposedly characterising reproductive unions⁸⁰. At least, we might argue, Brenda subverts established hierarchies by shunning the socially sanctioned type of femininity, girlfriend. The Brenda emerging in ‘A Coat of white Primer’, thus Brenda choosing to adopt the role of bride, contrastingly picks on Nate’s apparent unwillingness (or rather disability) to love. Watching the wedding video, Brenda disapproves of Nate’s ironically detached comment “Let’s do this thing” articulated with the facial expression and bodily gesticulations (see Fig. 3), which Leslie Heywood compares to that of a dummy or robot with “[...] all vibrancy drained out from his face” (211), and which counteract his shallow assertion that he is feeling alive⁸¹. When Brenda, puzzled by this line, repeats it in a mocking, criticising tone, Nate asks for “[...] no analysing”, to which Brenda replies: “I’m not analysing, I’m loving”, in a way that suggests she repeatedly has had to reassure him of herself as loving before⁸².

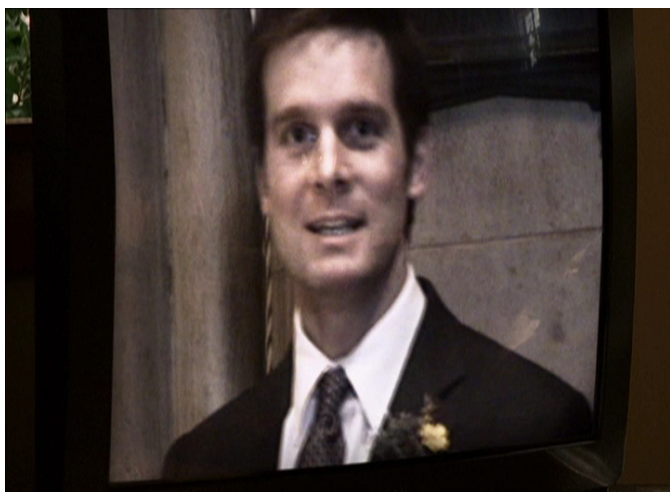


Fig. 3: “Let’s do this thing!”

⁸⁰ Being an antisocial version of femininity (especially when a woman deliberately stylises herself as such), ‘fuck puppet’ also seems to withstand societal boundaries in a way the roles ‘bride’ or ‘wife’ supposedly do not.

⁸¹ This moment is supposed to take place about three months after Nate’s brain surgery in which he nearly died. In Nate’s robotic body language most viewers will probably happily read that after all, this marriage is indeed a bad idea. Also Nate’s lifelessness seems to suggest that Lisa as bride is really a life-sucking, blood-sucking vampire, comparable to the bride featured in the Smirnoff ad.

⁸² In season 2, Brenda views her habit of analysing as ‘unnatural’: “It’s about me being not outside myself for once. Not watching, not analysing every goddamn moment as it happens [...] just becoming nature [...]” (2:9). Brenda’s observations in this quote (standing outside oneself) indicate an identity other than the fixed and stable Cartesian subject. Notably, Brenda characterises such an identity as a threat to mental sanity.

Apparently presenting her newly reconfigured romantic, ‘feminine’ self, Brenda makes an important point in this scene,: she does not seem to be analysing from a detached, ‘masculine’ point of view like she used to in earlier episodes, exposing domestic Joe’s excitement as ‘bridal’ and restraining from the cliché-laden role ‘wife’ by asking Nate to be one. In this episode, she is rather asking for Nate’s loving capacities, exposing his unromantic, distancing “Let’s do this thing’ as lacking just that loving commitment. But ultimately, Brenda is of course still analysing and sharply points out not only the inappropriateness of Nate’s remark within the frame of romantic heterosexuality, but also his emotional numbness that brings it about in the first place⁸³.

While common gender clichés would perhaps light-heartedly categorise Nate’s statement as the typically male romantic illiteracy, a preference of a mundane and ironic, rather than romantic and committed vernacular⁸⁴, Brenda appears to see through the conventional façade. She subtly exposes that Nate’s decision to marry Lisa is troublesome and makes the audience doubly aware of his reluctance to acknowledge what he is just about to do (i.e. marrying Lisa) by repeating his evasive reference to “this thing”. For the viewers, it is clear that in diegetic terms, Nate is taking the wrong path at this point, that this marriage will prove a disaster and that he should really be with Brenda, the more complex and interesting character, as Sally R. Munt calls her, the major persona (274).

Despite her sharp understanding of Nate’s robotic unease, Brenda’s present vision of the perfectly clean wedding covering up any traces of abject matter (whether fluidity or rancid food) seems, in comparison to earlier seasons, conspicuously narrow-minded. When in season 2, Nate and Brenda talk about an outdoor wedding at the beach, Nate voices worries about the location due to horse droppings on the ground where they would take their vows (“There’s like horseshit everywhere.”) Brenda, much to Nate’s distress, considers the dirtiness perfect, putting on once again her analysing and unruly, rather than loving voice: “[...] if we exchange

⁸³ The dichotomy loving/analysing is thus far from clear-cut and the discussion thereof serves as indicator of collapsing boundaries, a motif vital for the construction of the mad bride.

⁸⁴ Reports of wedding preparations, both personal and academic accounts, frequently include the topos of the groom’s reluctance to indulge in over-excited planning of the wedding (see, for instance, Foley). Dawn H. Currie’s study reveals that the groom spends, and indeed is expected to spend, considerably less energy and time in wedding preparations. Noting also the participating couples’ assertions to “[...] have egalitarian domestic relations, [she comments that] it is perhaps ironic that the couple’s first public act already begins to establish a traditional, unequal pattern of domestic labour” (Currie 418). Also, this topos reaffirms essentialist gender discourses: one male participant has “[...] a feeling that it’s not in men’s genes”, while his wife confirms that “[...] he just has better and more pressing things to think about” (both qtd. in Currie 414).

vows surrounded by horseshit, it'd be kind of fitting". While Nate is unable to envision anything beyond the obvious ("Meaning you think us getting married is a shitty idea?"), Brenda is stylised as visionary: "Meaning, we're going into this open-eyed, shit and all." ('Someone Else's Eyes' 2:9). It seems as if the contrast could not be greater: whereas the Brenda featured in 'A Coat of White Primer' envisions an ardently preserved, even 'antiseptic' cleanliness⁸⁵ that must prove *short-sighted*, the Brenda of earlier seasons and her radical ways of embracing 'shit' and consciously facing a marriage's difficulties might be considered *open-eyed*⁸⁶. Brenda's vision decisively departs from, and destabilises idealistic representations of the heterosexual union as full of comfort, carefully cleansed of anything problematic or dirty, eclipsing "shit and all"⁸⁷. In her vision we furthermore might get a glimpse of abject materialisations emerging with a mad bride's refusal to stay within culturally separated realms, and instead confusing the respective boundaries: here, we predominantly witness the collapse of clean/dirty.

In 'Someone Else's Eyes' (2.9.), it is rather wifely Nate who clings to neat and tidy versions of heterosexual unions, seeks to hide hints of abject matter, and consequently is appalled by Brenda's comment. It is also Nate who dreads the possibility of Brenda's wedding dress getting abjectly dirty ("So isn't [the horseshit] gonna mess up your white dress?"), while Brenda is at first not affected by this option by ruling out the dress altogether ("Yeah, like I'm gonna wear a white dress"), and then rather indulges in a grotesque and excessive vision of animal excrements in connection to the abjection of the maternal body ("And hopefully my mother will step in some of it. Or even better, fall face first into it, and then it really will be the happiest day of my life"). Effeminate Nate cannot share Brenda's 'madness' that manifests as her embrace of abject materiality, but dreads its capacities to dirty the dress. He fears an abject merging of human and animal matter, the beautiful (wedding dress) and the abject (horse droppings), which would severely trouble those borders Western

⁸⁵ A tent is supposed to prevent that guests get soaked – we might also recall the meaning of 'tent' as an absorbent roll used in medicine to cleanse wounds (OED, second edition 1989, online version January 2012).

⁸⁶ In order not to fall into the trap of safely separated dichotomies myself, it seems vital to point out that Brenda's apparent open-eyedness of earlier seasons cannot be kept up entirely. For instance, she struggles hard to acknowledge her feelings of confinement produced by this first engagement to Nate.

⁸⁷ A connection between marriage and excrements is again evoked in season 4 when Ruth and George get faeces in a gift-box as an anonymous wedding present (later revealed to have come from a neglected son of George's). Here the excrements might be read as indicators of Ruth's blindness in marrying a man she has just met, thus, naïvely disavowing "shit and all".

(wedding) traditions so carefully have set. At this point, Nate ardently desires the myth of the heterosexual monogamous bond. Arguably, this myth relies on clear dichotomies and their respective boundaries and must not go to an ambiguous, in-between place (in this context a place that mingles abject animal excrement with civilisation and its alleged cleanliness).

In fact, Nate desires to keep this vision unblemished, which makes him try to hide traces of the animal abject – as if to hide his not serene, indeed animalistic eagerness to take Brenda’s hand, and suffocate her in marriage bed, as if to, to speak with Vikki Bell, hide his bridal monstrosity, the threat of becoming-animal. Brenda as child, on the other hand, uses the prospect of becoming-animal for her own purposes. In a resistance to phallogocentric discourse, in a desire to establish a counter-narrative to the fixed identity her therapists try to impose on her, she rebels against “[...] infinite prescription and constant surveillance” (MacLeod 137) by starting to bark and growl like a dog in her therapy sessions. Nate, however, is afraid to violate bridal decorum, which invariably demands his humanity and must not display traces of animality. He dreads the pain of loss, a feeling that comes to define his life, and at this point tends to think he can avoid it by entering a clean, hetero-normative marital bond⁸⁸. What Merri Lisa Johnson argues to be Nate’s reason for marrying Lisa seems to be equally true for his desire to wed Brenda: having realised his mortality, he longs for “[...] security, stability and predictability [...]” (27), all of which marriage seems to legally promise and the Western white wedding publicly performs.

Three seasons later, it is *Brenda* who struggles to hide every hint of bridal monstrosity, be it getting soaked, having rancid food or displaying an uncanny proximity to dead Lisa. Contrastingly, after having been disillusioned by his marriage to Lisa, Nate distances himself from Brenda’s vision of sterile perfection. Notably, the promise of this idealised construction of cleanliness does not hold for long – as we have seen, even if it is renounced, the abject retains a looming presence. Also the stylisation of Brenda as a softened, romanticised/’loving’, indeed cleansed version of herself, who naïvely clings to fairy tale narratives of the perfect, unblemished wedding, seems to collapse – or rather, probably existed only on the surface in the first place. Brenda miscarries two nights before getting married, which makes it clear that her vision of the scrupulously clean and perfect wedding,

⁸⁸ Basically, it shall be argued that Nate’s fear of loss and his desire for a safe, monogamous bond (a desire, which, in Western culture, is coded feminine) effeminates him (“Looks like Nate may have to get married without a prick”). The male fear of loss (of the phallus), his castration anxiety, might also be read as “[...] fear of becoming feminine, becoming abjected as the feminine” (Butler *Bodies* 205).

as well as a bridal identity as docilely adhering to socially sanctioned boundaries, has been a chimera: she wakes up in bed as though she has had a nightmare, realises that she has lost a lot of blood and gets her hands all bloody when she touches her lower body⁸⁹. Once again the bed becomes a site of horror, only that now it cannot be decided who is getting killed and who does the killing⁹⁰. Just as terror (i.e. rushed, suffocating intimacy) may start at home, indeed in bed, the abject may emerge within one's own body, being "[...] less viewable and so less easy to cope with" (Goodnow 34), threatening to erase one's sense of identity in a hidden metamorphosis (Goodnow 34-35). The abject gets a particularly gripping quality when internal changes are "[...] unknown to oneself until they take over and produce death" (Goodnow 34). Indeed, Brenda first thinks she has had a dream and only through the sight of her blood does she realise the suddenly changed state of her body (see Fig. 4). To calm her down, Nate says "It's OK, it's OK", as if to soberly accept her leaking femininity, as if to take her monstrous hand, which, according to Lisa, is indicative of her unconventional past as 'slutbag'. It should also be noted that Brenda's body is not only rendered abject with her miscarriage, but has been portrayed as uncontained before.



Fig. 4: Brenda's bloody hand

Brenda's pregnant body indeed seems to have the "[...] power to radically unsettle order [...]" (91), as Caroline Magennis (92-93) argues along the lines of Kristeva's concept of the redoubled body: being opposite to the closed male body, as well as not adhering to the cult of thinness, the pregnant body can be considered "[...] the ultimate abject, an Other that contains an Other" (92), that will not stop swelling, and retains its incontinence after birth by

⁸⁹ Even though this argument shall not be pursued further, it is perhaps legitimate to suspect that it was the stressful striving for 'white', clean perfection (of her wedding, as well as her identity) by keeping to rigidly defined boundaries, that caused her miscarriage.

⁹⁰ The dead baby on the one hand epitomises innocence, on the other hand endangers Brenda's health.

breastfeeding the child (Magennis 92-93). Brenda's pregnancy is not advanced, and therefore does not (yet) in fact undermine the cult of thinness. Her body, including her notoriously loose mouth, is, however, depicted as leaking, incontinent and uncontained, all indicators that a wedding imagined to conform to the parameters of puritan cleanliness, heterosexual 'whiteness' and fixed boundaries is going to go utterly wrong – not least because Brenda's body just will not fit into the rigid boundaries of what constitutes the ideal, contained body of bridal femininity. According to Kristeva's theory, the maternal body as abject matter haunts us in a 'privileged' way because it reminds us of our borderline relationship with the mother as infant, as well as of the painful, yet vital separation from this other body. As this separation is exercised in a clumsy manner, instances of the maternal abject threaten with the subject's annihilation – and profoundly affect us in that they simultaneously attract and repulse. Furthermore, pregnancy is (like hidden, cancerous growths) an example of the abject *within* (Kristeva 11): an internal, almost 'magical' change takes place, which the 'I' experiences but cannot account for: "Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm [...] And no one is present [...] to signify what is going on" (Kristeva *Motherhood* 237, qtd. in Goodnow 34). Brenda's abject body functions as a source of horrific disruption that threatens the Symbolic order in defying the separation of clean and unclean, self and other, and, in the liminal stage of miscarrying, inside and outside, life and death. This particularly ambiguous state of body and identity is to be harmonised with the role of bride, which demands cleanly separated realms and an ardent preservation of boundaries in order to retell that "[...] the ubiquitous story [...]" (Anderson 106) shaped by patriarchal ideals, as well as to conceal the gaps and inconsistencies inherent to this female role. This friction of discourses should prove a fertile soil for bridal madness. Before this madness shall be assessed, however, I would like to dwell on the construction and representation of Brenda's abject body in more detail.

Also before her miscarriage, Brenda's body is repeatedly portrayed as abject. In the wedding video, Lisa's former boss Carol makes an observation about the ways weddings can construct socially sanctioned versions of femininity, and thereby provides the episode's title: "I love how weddings just erase the past, like a coat of white primer. Slap a veil on her and the biggest slutbag on the planet becomes a fresh-faced ingénue". At this point, Brenda stands up, stumbles "Oh, I'm gonna puke", leaves the room and we, together with Nate, hear her retching. Brenda and Nate blame the smell of coffee, but the viewers are left wondering

whether it was not rather the painful reference to ‘slutbags’ putting on white veils (thus covering up every hint of their interiority that might expose them as slutbags, abject bodies at the fringes of society) that made her vomit (thus turn her interiority out). The latter explanation for Brenda’s nausea is plausible, given that Lisa’s ghost, as projection of Brenda’s inner conflicts, is going to use that same derogatory term, the reference to her past, as well the implication of white veils trying to hide that past, for chastising Brenda later in the episode.

Repeatedly, Brenda makes her abject materiality hypervisible and graspable for everybody, her environment and the audience: her vomiting is referenced multiply⁹¹, and her loose mouth, thus her verbal incontinence, reinforces her bodily incontinence all the more. She insists on bathing Maya as she “[...] gotta pee anyway for the billionth time today” and draws extra attention to the notion of the per se leaking female, the fluidity seemingly inherent to her body, by ironically asking: “Where does it all come from?”. Elizabeth Grosz suggests that the Western female body has been constructed as lacking self-containment, as a “[...] formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order” (*Volatile* 203). In this example we might indeed notice that order may be threatened by female fluidity, as we witness a conflation of the clean and the unclean: Brenda’s abject, decidedly female fluidity intrudes in a presumable clean and sterile site, the bathroom, where the culturally approved action of cleaning Maya’s young and pristine body is going to take place, but is counteracted by Brenda’s inability to control her body’s workings and her apparently excessive urinating⁹². When her body is not visibly abject, she exposes it so, countering David’s compliment “You look great” with “Thank you, I feel like shit”.

⁹¹ She is commenting on the obnoxious smell of coffee, announcing her ‘puking’, we hear her retching and wonder about distracted Nate’s belated reaction.

⁹² The construction of the female body as incontinent, formless and uncontrollable originates in the Renaissance (see Paster, Johnston or Grosz *Volatile*).



Fig. 6

Fig. 5: Lisa's covered up pregnancy

In a quite different construction of the pregnant female, Lisa's pregnancy is portrayed in season 2 as hidden and literally covered up by her big coat (see Fig. 5). When Nate unexpectedly runs into her, he would not even have noticed her, in fact quite advanced, pregnancy without her opening up her coat, bluntly dropping the line "By the way, I'm pregnant" ('Someone Else's Eyes' 2:9). Apart from a meek reference to her hormones ('The Secret' 2:10), the (object) qualities of Lisa's pregnant body are eclipsed entirely. Adhering again to cultural standards of contained femininity after giving birth, her body reappears in the twelfth episode of season 2. She calls Ruth (interrupting her from a frantic cleaning session) to tell her that she has delivered a couple of weeks early and the episode ends in a tableau of domestic bliss, in which Ruth gets to know her granddaughter in a cosy and clean environment (see Fig. 6, 'I'll Take You' 2:12)⁹³. Also, Lisa's maternal body is questioned as being leaking per se when Claire (albeit sarcastically) wonders whether vegans breastfeed ('The Last Time' 2:13). Contrastingly, in her second, not terminated pregnancy, Brenda's water is breaking in the middle of the Fishers' kitchen (see Fig. 7), again infiltrating and polluting what is considered a clean site where, due to its proximity to food, purging rituals necessarily take place on a regular basis ('Static' 5:11). This "[...] joining of that which should be separate" (Douglas 113), the clean and the unclean, this manifestation of the abject as the composite, is typical of Brenda's body and identity, both of which refuse to be confined to given boundaries, but tend to literally spill over, generating chaos and 'madness'. Also, her pregnancy, in contrast to Lisa's, indeed "[...] bring[s] up associations with unclean birth [and] other violent separations [...]" (Goodnow 43).

⁹³ This scene, that further distances the bodily presence of the female body by being filmed from outside the house, through the open door, forms a stark contrast to Nate's shattering discovery of Brenda's infidelities that is staged in the same episode. This discovery ultimately destroys the myth of their monogamous relationship.



Fig. 7

Brenda's water is breaking

But let us return to 'A Coat of White Primer'. After her miscarriage⁹⁴, Brenda's abject corporeality is no longer the object of light-hearted small talk, but acquires a pronounced uncanny quality. Taking painkillers, Brenda listlessly watches a documentary on Henry 8th, who, as the viewer happens to hear quite clearly in the documentary's voice-over, "by 1547 had become a revolting, swollen mass of putrefying flesh, [...] which meant that he constantly stank of his rotten flesh". The picture drawn of Henry 8th is a decidedly abject one as it features a body that unifies what should be separate and thereby threatens the supposedly secure boundary separating life and death. Henry's own rotten flesh is dead matter intermingling in a living organism, indeed life is drained out of organic systems, which is quintessentially abject (Berressem 44) – what is supposed to be protecting and holding together internal matter, thus, what is considered life-saving (flesh and skin), is exposed as being traitorously, even treacherously foul⁹⁵. Also, it is a body with traits of the grotesque: as "swollen mass", Henry's bodily image indeed threatens to be "[...] exaggerated to disproportionate dimensions [...]" (Bakhtin 312) and to "outgrow[...] its own self [...]" (Bakhtin 317). Also the insistence that he *constantly* stank points towards grotesque excessiveness and hyperbolism. The introduction of Henry's abject body serves, I want to argue, two intensifying functions: first, it stresses Brenda's abject corporeality, and second, it draws an uncanny parallel between Brenda and Lisa.

⁹⁴ The D&C (dilation and curettage) has to be postponed until after the wedding.

⁹⁵ I am alluding to Kristeva's depiction of the abject as traitor (4).

The documentary's voice-over obviously grabs Nate's attention: he turns to the screen, while Brenda contrastingly looks away (see Fig. 8)⁹⁶. Brenda, it seemingly is reinforced again, is no longer the open-eyed analyser embracing 'shit and all': she cannot face either Henry's rotting, let alone her own leaking, miscarrying corporeality and therefore averts her eyes. Both her and Henry's body unify living and dead matter⁹⁷, and thus trouble most fundamental ontological boundaries. Brenda's body additionally confuses the line between self and other, which marks her doubly abject. The dead baby itself similarly threatens a variety of borders. First, it vacillates between the position of a being whose life must be secured and protected, and that of a non-being that threatens life and must be expelled as soon as possible. Related to this ambivalence, it is unclear whether the baby is a part of Brenda's body or something alien to be discarded. Also, even though the baby is dead, it seems to be endowed with an uncanny energy to which Brenda has to adapt (by wearing a pad, not wearing a thong, freshening up etc.). Therefore, it is safe to say that the abject, as per definition undermining the very possibility of differentiating between inside and outside (Kristeva 1), as well as the breaching of a variety of further borders, is strongly evoked in Brenda's corporeal state. Necessarily fluid and ever-changing, her body cannot be thought as either holding, or ejecting the bloody mass that is (or once was?) Brenda's baby. Brenda's bodily in-between state⁹⁸ therefore is, comparably to Henry's both living and dead body, wavering between life and death, between life-giving and life-taking, thus "[...] beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (Kristeva 2). Note that this is the construction of Brenda's bodily state in the night before her wedding, thus shortly before she adopts the role of bride and puts on the pristine white gown, i.e. just before she takes her place in the 'ubiquitous story' of white cleanliness. This extremely excessive and unthinkably ambiguous bodily state foreshadows Brenda's madness as bride, which accommodates the transgressions of various boundaries. Before this aspect shall be discussed, I want to further

⁹⁶ The motif of Nate turning his attention away from Brenda can be traced quite frequently in this episode. When Brenda is throwing up, Nate is distracted by Lisa talking to her alleged murderer Hoyt in the wedding video. When he dances with Brenda at their wedding, he notices a bird (symbolising death and/or Lisa, which would be another evidence for her uncanny, overarching presence) eating their wedding cake.

⁹⁷ Brenda's dead baby is not yet aborted and therefore still is in touch with her living flesh, thus the 'I' is contaminated by the 'not-I'.

⁹⁸ Because of the postponed curettage, the foetus partly remains in her uterus and partly leaks out of her body.

pursue the wide-reaching implications of Brenda's abject body and how the representation thereof is shaped by a variety of accompanying discourses and subtexts.



Fig. 8: Nate's attention is stirred up by Henry's abject body

Though impossible, intolerable and unthinkable, the comment on Henry seems to strike a particular resonant chord in Nate who, from entirely ignoring the documentary, turns to an intent listener (see Fig. 8). While the scene started out from Brenda's perspective, it conspicuously ends centring Nate's and, contrary to what could be expected, there is no close-up depicting Brenda's deep emotions. Given that Nate has previously watched the wedding video, it seems plausible that Lisa is momentarily lingering in his mind and that the vivid account of Henry's flesh triggers a reminiscence of Lisa's flesh (see Fig. 9) after her drowning death in season 3. Her corpse was represented in remarkably similar terms by the coroner: "This is the worst one I've had in a long time. It's like those whales when they die [...] The guts turn to cream and explode. All that's left when they wash up on shore is a big bag of blubber" ('Falling Into Place' 4:1). Henry's body as swollen mass displays a loss of its own boundaries similar to Lisa's body as a whale-like, big bag of blubber, the contours of which have been deformed by exploding insides: both are thus abject in Kristeva's sense, "[...] in which form and structure threaten to decompose and disintegrate" (Fer 130). Having turned to cream, Lisa's insides further indicate an abject transformation of what was once guaranteeing life – as has been argued above, this is true of Henry's body as well. In addition, Lisa's body as a pulpy mass of decomposed flesh makes Nate and David, when they pick up the body, open the hearse's windows because of its offensive, unbearable odours, a motif evoked again by the reference to Henry's permanent disgusting stench emanating from his own rotten flesh.



Fig. 9: Lisa's abject corpse

Via Henry's body, also Lisa and Brenda's bodies are linked in a similar portrayal of abject flesh masses symbolising death and loss – Lisa being dead, and Brenda having her “[...] dead baby leaking out of [her] all day”. Also, both Lisa's corpse and Brenda's miscarriage body visibly turn their inside matter (guts and blood, respectively) out, “[...] in order to compensate for the collapse of border between inside and outside” (Kristeva 53) – at this point we might recall the example of the turned glove that both symbolises the simultaneous display of interior and exterior, as well as the treat of castration and loss. As Sally R. Munt argues, loss is majorly informing Nate's life and is largely driving the series' narrative momentum: after Lisa's dramatic death (and possible murder), Nate's loss resonates throughout the ensuing episodes. Munt traces a series of losses in Nate's story line (267), which I want to take up and connect to his romantic relationships. In season 2, he offers Brenda his loving, wifely hand, which she indirectly rejects by her numerous sexual digressions. In season 3, he has to literally bury his lost wife with his own bare hands⁹⁹. At this point in the narrative, Brenda's miscarriage is yet another loss Nate has to cope with. He declares it is 'OK' for him to take Brenda's bloody hand and seems to sign up for additional losses in marrying her – and in absorbing Henry 8th revoltingness, he appears to realise just that. However, for an analysis of Brenda as mad bride it is more relevant that via the motif of loss, Lisa and Brenda are again – despite all their arguable differences – rendered unbearably close to one another. This threat of sameness gives way to Brenda occupying a subject position of ambiguity and excess, as will be elucidated below.

⁹⁹ He wants to honour Lisa's wishes by giving her a 'natural' (and illegal) burial at an unmarked spot in the desert.

Brenda's bloody hand and, in extension, her miscarrying, blood-shedding body as a symbol of loss is further explored in a scene that directly, albeit contrastingly in tone, relates to Lisa's wedding featured in the wedding video: with motherly assistance, the bride puts on the wedding dress and gets ready for the ceremony. While at Lisa's wedding, this occasion spawns narratives of fairy-tale bliss, Brenda's final preparations boil down to the attempt to cover up her abject corporeality. In Brenda's dressing scene, a variety of competing discourses and partly intertwined, yet contrastive, female stock characters (angel, whore, crone, seductress, mother) can be traced. As Brenda appears to embody all of these (contradictory) roles, she partakes in a further confusion of respective boundaries. As will be argued in the following paragraphs, this excessive subject position and its materialisation as excessive loss of blood are introduced and reinforced via yet another maternal body. Just two episodes previous to 'A Coat of White Primer', Brenda's mother, notoriously uninhibited Margaret¹⁰⁰, has to undergo a hysterectomy which is preceded by unstoppable bleeding ('The Bomb Shelter', 4:11). The writer of this episode, Scott Buck, explicitly points out in the DVD commentary that "Margaret's problems here are to help set up Brenda's continued urgency toward having her own baby. Just to emphasise how ephemeral that time is".

In fact, I would read these scenes as directly contributing to the construction of Brenda as mad bride, which is so strongly informed by discourses on (disabled) maternity and loss¹⁰¹ – this is why a short discussion of Margaret's scenes shall bridge the way towards an analysis of Brenda's excessive subject position and its materialisation featured in 'A Coat of White Primer'. The plot point of Margaret's hysterectomy is considerably exploited: the episode narrates from her incessant loss of blood in a restaurant's restroom, in which she asks Brenda for a pad ("It just won't stop bleeding"), to her nervous ramblings after surgery. After demanding an unreasonably high amount of Vicodin (note the parallel to miscarrying Brenda, see below), Margaret excuses her unruly behaviour with: "That's exactly what I'm gonna be: a nasty, old crone, now that I am no longer a woman". When Brenda replies: "Mom, that doesn't make you any less of a woman", she half mockingly, half aggressively threatens

¹⁰⁰ Margaret can perhaps safely be called a personification of the unruly woman: she publicly swears, drinks, laughs loudly (often violating existing social constraints by laughing too freely) and constantly makes a spectacle of herself (often by wearing extravagant outfits, see Fig 11).

¹⁰¹ To reinforce the notion of possible loss of child, the episode later features Nate as not being able to imagine conceiving another child. After Lisa's sister Barb finds out about Nate's illegal burial of Lisa, Barb threatens to take Maya away from him.

Brenda with sterility and loss, drawing attention to the unwomanly aspect of this prospect: “Oh, really? Then give me your uterus”.

Margaret’s excessive bleeding is a perfect example of the abject: centring around bodily openings and constituting exchanges with the environment that get out of bounds (thus when the flows of bodily fluid become uneconomic, unstoppable fluxes), these excesses are perceived detrimental to the bodily system, and are considered symptoms of systemic illness, sterility and death (Berressem 43)¹⁰². Margaret’s excessive flow of bodily fluid may further be read as an indication of “[...] the permeability of the body: its weaknesses, its orifices, the impossibility of maintaining it as a coherent and closed system” (Harradine 75), and, as shall be argued, of the precariousness of identity. Her flux of blood profoundly troubles her sense of identity by apparently abnegating her gender. On these shaky grounds, a variety of female roles are imposed on her: while she assigns herself a crone-like status, Brenda insists on her still being a woman, thus questions the conventional wisdom that the marker ‘–fertile’ should equate ‘–female’. While Margaret refuses Billy’s flowers because “[f]lowers are for pretty little girls, not someone like [her]”, she is treated by Brenda as if she was a defiant child: in an apparent role reversal of mother and daughter, Brenda gently asks Margaret for more reasonable behaviour. What is more, Margaret’s lover Olivier constructs her as seductress when he bluntly formulates his desire to have sex with her.

Margaret thus occupies a subject position of multiple affiliations that breaches the boundaries of an authentic, unified Cartesian self. Significantly, Brenda tells her brother Billy about her wish to have a baby right after their mother’s hysterectomy – as though Brenda has realised the threat posed by the uneconomic bleeding, the threat of turning into a sterile “nasty, old crone” herself on a more mundane level (thus being aware of the omnipresent ‘biological clock’, which pop psychology purports to be ever heard ticking by women of a certain age), as well as the more subtle threat of a socially condemned identity characterised by ambiguity and excess, being at once crone, seductress, woman, mother and little girl.

Arguably, in ‘A Coat of White Primer’ the hospital scene is re-enacted on various levels when Margaret helps Brenda dressing for the wedding. Via her very recently experienced

¹⁰² The motif of incessant flows of blood is literally running like a red thread through the whole series: season 2 features blood pouring out from the drains in the embalming room (‘The Last Time’ 2:13), in season 3, a woman dies because of unstoppable nose bleeding in the ‘cold open’ (‘Making Love Work’ 3:6), and in season 4, the embalming room is literally flooded with blood due to a damaged plumbing system, making Claire exclaim in delight: “This is like right out of *The Shining*”. Notably, the blood first is seen erupting from the kitchen sink, infiltrating a supposedly sterile site (‘In Case of Rapture’ 4:2).

abject, excessive flux of female blood, Margaret's presence¹⁰³ poses the threat of sterility, as well as the body's heterogeneity and identity's permeability. First, the consistent viewer surely has Margaret's grotesque flux of blood as destabilising her identity still in mind and second, she openly introduces Brenda as crone-like Miss Havisham in her comment on her bridal underwear (see Fig.10): "Are these big granny panties your 'something old'? Because they really kill the mood." Realising how unforgiving the pristine white gown is, Brenda's 'sartorial conscience' (Bell *Human* (18-19) qtd. in Entwistle 326) is alarmed. Further knowing that, as a bride, the boundary separating youthful fertility from crone-like sterility must by no means be transgressed, she anxiously asks: "You can't see them through the dress, can you?", to which Margaret replies: "No, but they are hideous, sweetie. Would it kill you to wear a thong?" Half-heartedly assuring her mother that "[t]hese are fine", Brenda tries to evade Margaret's knowing gaze. When after further inquisition, Brenda exasperatedly insists that "Nothing's the matter. I just don't wanna wear a thong", Margaret realises what the viewer has known all along, namely that actually Brenda is *all* matter, that she in fact struggles to keep her inner materiality inside her body, to remove "[a]ll attributes of the unfinished world [...], as well as all the signs of its inner life" (Bakhtin 320). Similar to the bridal glove, the interior of which must not be openly displayed "[...] in a ceremony that is about the outward displays of circulation [...]" (Bell 463-464), Brenda's inner corporeality is to be hidden in order not to violate the boundary separating interiority from exteriority, in order not to embody *both* inner *and* outer matter, *both* living *and* dead matter, *both* pristine whiteness *and* "big granny panties", in short, not to become a *mad bride*.

¹⁰³ The representation of Margaret's body, which notably is strongly informed by the star persona of Joanna Cassidy, is extremely complex and many-faceted. While her body certainly triggers horrors of female aging (Kristeva's abject from *without*, the woman's greying, shrivelling body posing the threat of becoming grotesque and violating the confines of the beautiful (Covino 4-5)) via her hysterectomy, she generally appears, as Michael Engler in the DVD commentary suggests, like some strange creature from another planet that does not seem be bound to visible decay. Still, she indulges, perhaps out of cultural pressure, in conventional "[...] fantasies of rejuvenation and agelessness" (Sobchak 342) and considers a cosmetic surgery for rejuvenating her vagina. After her hysterectomy Margaret appears in what Alan Ball calls an 'extremely vaginal blouse' (see Fig. 11), prompting Brenda to exclaim: "Now you look recovered", to which Margaret loudly laughs ('Untitled'4:12).



Fig. 10: Brenda's "big granny panties"

Realising the cultural implications of her abject materiality that violates the exclusionary mechanisms of Western white wedding culture, Brenda tries to hide every hint of her leaking interiority and hopes that wearing "big granny panties" and a pad¹⁰⁴ will help to contain her body, to prevent it from leaking out beyond its boundaries. The control of seeping body fluids is "[...] a matter of vigilance, never guaranteed" (Grosz *Volatile* 194). In a last attempt to succumb to "[c]ontemporary wedding cultures [which], in Western heterosexual forms, tend to perpetuate normative femininity, women's visual accessibility, and women's position as clean and mannered bodies" (White, abstract), Brenda paradoxically takes a subject position of excess and ambivalence. Even if her "big granny panties" cannot be seen through the dress, Margaret makes sure to point out their hideousness – a bride's body is not supposed to reflect *both* shining bridal youth *and* the mortality of the body. Brenda's bridal body functions as a signifier that is, similar to Margaret's own body, capable of more than one interpretation, indeed takes a position of ambiguity and uncertainty, and thus may serve as an example of a mad bride. At this point I would like to draw attention to Mary Russo's observations about *Nights in the Circus's* (Angela Carter) Lizzie and Fevvers forming an intergenerational body (178-179). Similarly, Margaret and Brenda's bodies seem to form an intergenerational grotesque that obscures their ages, inverts their relationship, and confuses birth and death like "[...] pregnant senile hags" (Bakhtin 25, see also 322).

¹⁰⁴ Perhaps, the artificially produced hygienic article might be read as an extension of Brenda's body ("[a]nything that comes into contact with the surface of the body and remains there long enough will be incorporated into the body image [...] (Grosz *Volatile* 80)): soaked with her blood, it is located in the most dangerous zone where inside and outside collapse – it is "[...] midway between the inanimate and the body" (Grosz *Volatile* 81) and might thus be compared to abject excretions and waste products of the body. Like the dead, potentially dangerous foetus, it must be disposed of and demands regular inspection and panoptic surveillance – in order to guarantee that Brenda's bridal body stands just that inspection.



Fig. 11: Margaret's excessive body

Engaging in a discourse of overabundance, Brenda is marked with (ideologically invested) notions that conventionally are conflicting and incompatible. Bluntly put, she is on the verge of turning into Margaret, the sterile, “nasty old crone”, and accordingly has to wear her “big granny panties”¹⁰⁵. This reading is probably intended by the show (and reinforced by Lisa’s ghost, see below) in order to construct a narrative arc of suspense sustained by the uncertainty of whether Brenda will finally have her baby. Strikingly similar to Margaret’s hospital scene, this scene evokes a wide variety of discourses on femininity and constructs Brenda’s subject position as ambiguous, multiple and excessive. While Margaret tries to impose the role of the seductress on her (by her suggestion to wear a thong, a symbol of hyper-sexuality that forms a part of the post-feminist discourse celebrating female empowerment (Ringrose and Walkerdine 233)), Brenda’s first worry is that her pants might show through the dress, thus she tries to hide every hint of her interiority (both leaking and aging body) and uncontrollable fluidity, struggles to present herself as overtly clean and desperately strives towards femininity as contained, white and unblemished, in its moral as well as bodily sense.

¹⁰⁵ Also Miss Havisham, the paragon of ‘in-between-ness’, can be traced in this construction of Brenda, who is in a state of limbo concerning her societal (right before the ceremony proper, she is not really single, but not married neither), and her biological status (like Bakhtin’s “[...] pregnant senile hags” (25), she ambivalently fuses aging flesh and the flesh of new life).



Fig. 12: Brenda as little girl

Brenda takes a subject position that comprises sterile granny and little girl at once: like a vulnerable child (see Fig 12), she absorbs Margaret's consoling words ("More women have miscarried than they have masturbated with a dildo. They just don't talk about it") and later repeats what Margaret has told her to Lisa as if she has learned the maternal wisdom by heart ("A lot of women have miscarriages! They just don't talk about it, so people don't realise")¹⁰⁶. Furthermore, when Brenda struggles to suppress crying ("I don't wanna fuck up my make-up"), and Margaret calms her down ("Oh, honey, I will just clean you up with a good powder. Here, I've got some Chanel in my purse"), the episode not only introduces the motif of culturally demanded cleanliness, but draws a parallel to motherly Brenda bathing Maya and consequently confuses the layers of mother and child as the scene also complexly mirrors Brenda's care for Margaret after surgery. The most explicit link between Margaret's hysterectomy and Brenda's miscarriage is, of course, the reference to uncontrollable fluxes of blood and the need for a pad to preserve the illusion of the contained, mannered body¹⁰⁷. It is important to note that Brenda's body as merging dichotomous polarities is markedly different from "[...] new bourgeois fantasies of femininity [...]" (Ringrose and Walkerdine 232), which apparently resolve a set of dichotomies, resulting in the 'Yummy Mummy' who is 'having it all' – the conflicting markers that inform Brenda's body rather construct her as 'having nothing' (having lost her baby, not deserving "[...] her own special fucking day [...]"). Eventually, Brenda's versions of the 'self' merge and are on the verge of collapsing:

¹⁰⁶ This is a striking innovation in the mother-daughter relationship of Margaret and Brenda as typically Brenda would be very critical towards everything Margaret says.

¹⁰⁷ Both abject states are not mentioned by name, but circumscribed: Margaret evasively concedes in the restaurant: "I've been feeling a little anaemic lately" and Brenda is unable to directly answer Margaret's question "What is it? What happened?", and starts sobbing.

the roles of mother, virgin, whore, self, other etc. cannot be separated any more, which severely troubles her role as bride.

Brenda retreats from the idyllic mother-daughter moment of intimacy by letting gory reality back in and referencing the most intriguing motif of the mad bride: “I’d better change this fucking pad, if I get blood on this dress, I’m gonna kill myself”. As Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva argue, and as Brenda painfully realises, the boundaries of the body are dangerous. The powerfully affective motif of blood on a bridal dress demonstrates the extent to which “[...] clothing and other forms of adornment, which operate at these “leaky” margins, are subject to social regulation and moral pronouncements” (Entwistle 327). Given that this particular piece of clothing, the pristine white gown, is the most treasured sartorial manifestation of beauty and that these particular, bridal Brenda’s, bodily margins are excessively, incessantly leaking, both social regulation and moral pronouncement cannot be met. Brenda, whose excessive subject position is abjectly materialising, is on the verge of severely violating the social and moral boundaries that function all the more powerfully in the context of the Western white wedding. Mary Douglas argues that “[a] polluting person is always in the wrong” (113) – we might add that a polluting *bride* not only is in the wrong, but is “[...] beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (Kristeva 2): abject.

At this point it is probably a good idea to recapitulate what has been said about Brenda’s various transgressions of boundaries, as well as to assess the ways in which those transgressions produce instances of the abject and work in constructions of Brenda as mad bride. First, this chapter drew attention to the pronounced contrast between Brenda as overanxious bridezilla trying too hard to conform to a variety of cultural boundaries, and earlier seasons’ construction of Brenda as unconventional transgressor of just these boundaries, which was suggested to provide glimpses of ‘madness’. Because of her bodily excesses, Brenda’s vision of a perfectly white wedding has been shown to be eventually collapsing. It has been alluded to Brenda’s pregnant body as refusing to stay within its own boundaries and repeatedly polluting what is supposed to be clean. In particular, I argued that her miscarrying body confuses the distinction between self and other, as well as brings together living and dead matter: each contaminating the other, the border between life and death is bound to collapse. This excessive position (being marked ‘+dead’ as well as ‘+alive’) is mirrored in Henry 8th’s both rotting and living flesh. Described as a “swollen mass”, which

deforms and blurs the boundaries of the body, Henry's flesh further serves as a reference to Lisa's flesh, a "big bag of blubber", another abject body "[...] which has lost its form and integrity" (Creed *Kristeva* 67). For Kristeva, decay is a "privileged place of mingling, of the contamination of life by death, of begetting and of ending" (149). Brenda and Lisa's bodies are thus paralleled in that both symbolise loss, as well as the shattering of various boundaries: not only life and death, but also self and other, mother and corpse are merging. The theme of uncanny proximity between both women is introduced right at the beginning of the episode (wedding video) and reaches its climax in the imagined conversation between Brenda and Lisa's ghost (for an analysis of this scene, see below). Arguably, the alliance of Brenda and Lisa's bodies triggers a complex network of competing ideological discourses on femininity that draw on (collapsing) dichotomies. This plurality of female roles is eventually intensified and complicated by Brenda's (and Margaret's) excessive flux of blood.

In an ever-shifting mode, Brenda constantly assumes new, contradictory or intertwined, roles that refuse to stay within normative boundaries supposedly defining a fixed 'self'. Negotiating her subject position is, as also Erin MacLeod (135) notes, a very difficult endeavour and in the previous pages a lot of roles have been referenced: loving/analysing, open-eyed/short-sighted, whore/angel, crone/seductress, mother/child are just some of the dichotomies Brenda incorporates. As expected, such an ambiguous, uncontained and excessive subject position abjectly materialises when the role of bride is assumed. On her wedding day, Brenda refers to the prospect of blood on the serene white dress twice: "I'd better change this fucking pad, if I get blood on this dress, I'm gonna kill myself" and "The only way I get to get married in the long white gown is to have my dead baby leaking out of me all day. That's me, that's what I get for my wedding". The blood she is shedding symbolises that Brenda is at a semantic crossroads, at a "[...] propitious place for abjection where *death* and *femininity*, *murder* and *procreation*, *cessation of life* and *vitality* all come together" (Kristeva 96, emphasis in the original) – it is at this place, supposedly a zone of uninhabitability (Butler *Bodies* 3), that the mad bride can be located.

In ‘A Coat of White Primer’ we encounter a phenomenon that has been mentioned in sections above: even though the motif of the white wedding dress besmirched with the mad bride’s abject matter (blood, as in most examples) is evoked twice, the threat is never actually realised, and the respective image does not materialise *visibly* for the audience¹⁰⁸. A similar aspect has been touched upon in relation to Clair Hughes’ discussion of the foreword to *The Bride of Lammermoor*, in which the raven’s blood is imagined to dirty a supposedly *white* dress – which, in fact, is blue. The grip and the imperative the white dress exercises has been furthermore related to Ophelia’s white dress, which is flourishing in a collective imagination without respective textual evidence. Also *Kill Bill Vol. 1* teases the audience with a black-and-white opening scene: instead of depicting the carnage in its gory details right in the beginning, (including the gripping motif of blood on a white wedding dress), the film waits for another fifteen minutes to satisfy its audience’s scopophilic and voyeuristic desires by showing the blood-splattered bridal dress in its full colour and gory details.

Given Brenda’s multiple transgressions, it is puzzling that they should not be materialised visibly when she is wearing the wedding gown. Resisting the grip and dramatic quality of the bloody white dress is a move that is particularly striking in the context of the series, which is known as being notoriously pictorial and at times portraying a bizarre superreality – in his review of the show, Andrew Billen laments that creator Alan Ball “[...] habitually turns the contrast knob of his imagination inappropriately high” (46). I would argue that the omission of the image proper does not make Brenda any less of a mad bride, but that the material stylisation as such just takes other forms. To judge whether these forms are more subtle is beyond the scope of this project – this different kind of materialisation rather invaluablely informs the account of the possibilities lying in representations of the mad bride. Furthermore, this paper is prompted to ask for the specific ways the episode utilises to make up for this apparent lack of visible manifestations of the abject.

To be accurate, the show does not entirely resist the fascinating as well as repelling image of red on white clothing and actually manages to incorporate the immediateness of materiality into the narrative of the wedding feast – albeit via an indirect route that is connected to the mad bride’s corporeality on various levels. After a bunch of photos have

¹⁰⁸ Arguably, the mere threat of the gory white gown is so strong and affective on its own account, so that an actual materialisation is not necessary for exercising the motif’s grip.

been taken of newly-wed bride and groom, Brenda retreats from the setting with the words “I’m just gonna freshen up”. Under different circumstances, we would assume that she is going to freshen up her make-up. At this particular point, however, we are rather led to think that Brenda is going to change her pad again, obviously to prevent blood besmirching her white dress – thus, we are vividly reminded of Brenda’s abject, leaking body. Right after Brenda’s (leaking) body has left the frame, Claire sets out to take pictures of Ruth and her husband George, who, in this mildly stressful situation, spills red wine on his white shirt. George has previously suffered from a severe mental crisis and has received a series of shock treatments. In the course of his recovery, and particularly in this scene, he is represented as childlike and effeminate, while a resolute (and very angry) Ruth is taking the lead.



Fig. 13: George violating the cultural imperative of cleanliness, Ruth reaching out to Claire

Thus, the haunting image also in this case indicates a shattered state of mind, a violated subjectivity and a loss of boundaries (adult/child, for instance) due to insanity – and, it *reaches out* to the audience, as well as to Claire in the most literal sense. Naïvely (or perhaps artistically envisioning the sublime potential of the image), Claire takes (black-and-white) pictures of George’s “[...] extremely compromised state”, capturing him with his arms raised so that Ruth can clean him up (see Fig 13, note that the bench on which Brenda will be sitting when Lisa’s ghost appears is visibly present in the whole take, thus forming a connection to Brenda’s scene as mad bride). Ruth furiously slaps Claire in the face, adding a decidedly bodily element to the graphic motif – from the insertion of three photographs to Ruth violently reaching out to Claire, the viewers are deeply immersed in the process¹⁰⁹. The

¹⁰⁹ In fact, one picture taken in this situation turns up again in the following episode, and the slap in Claire’s face is discussed in yet a later episode – thus the scene is resonating in our mind quite long.

prospect of dirtied white prompts a reaction quite similar to how Brenda deals with the threat of blood on the pristine bridal gown – after having some Seltzer at the bar to calm herself down, Ruth explains to Nate that she has to go back and “[c]lean the stain on [George’s] jacket before it sets”, thus referencing the cultural imperative of cleanliness for the fifth time in this episode – the other references have concerned Brenda bathing Maya, Margaret cleaning Brenda up with a good powder, Brenda changing her pad and freshening up. Comparably to Brenda announcing her freshening up, which makes her leave the frame, the reference takes its bow to the demand of sanitised cleanliness and, consequently, the strict separation of clean and dirty. It stresses that the dirty alternative is to be prevented, that the body must not be exposed as potentially open, that liquids must not be visible – be it sweat on a powdered face or red wine on a white shirt. Only, of course, in Brenda’s case, it actually is blood on a wedding dress that must be avoided, which is an incomparably greater taboo.

A few takes later, Brenda returns from her absence and has her scene with Lisa’s ghost. The slap on Claire’s face, the stain on George’s shirt and Brenda’s presumable retreat to the bathroom are still resonating in our mind. Instead of freshened up, however, Brenda re-enters the frame looking rather tired, worn out and slightly drunk, wearing Nate’s jacket¹¹⁰ and not so carefully made up hair. Like Ruth, she obviously has been at the bar (she is holding a glass of champagne), assumingly after she has changed her pad and has once again painfully realised her miscarriage and the excessively leaking state of her body which, as bride, is expected to be clean and mannered. Similar to Ruth, the threat of abject fluidity seems to have triggered emotional unease, which both seek to meet with alcohol. As far as the diegesis allows, the episode makes all efforts to link Brenda’s bridal transgressions, i.e. her madness, with the violation of dress by abject fluidity and interiority – we even get a glimpse of Brenda’s, albeit cleanly white, “granny panties” (see Fig. 10), which, we know, she only wears because of her leaking, miscarrying body that embodies both life and death, self and other. The option of a blood-besmirched wedding dress, one in which bridal madness is abjectly manifest, is repeatedly subtly evoked, and explicitly referred to twice – but, ultimately the series cannot go there and actually show a gory white gown¹¹¹. Still, the show’s

¹¹⁰ While this might perhaps be read as a faint effort to cover up her corporeality, I will argue below that the opposite is the case, thus that the jacket indeed stresses her corporeality.

¹¹¹ Despite HBO’s infamous slogan, which for years kept telling its audience that “It’s not TV”, *Six Feet Under* obviously *is*, to a certain extent, bound by the conventions of its medium.

notorious hunger for abject corporeality seems not yet entirely satisfied: in the following paragraphs it will be argued that the series does find ways to further underscore Brenda's bodily presence, making her representation as abject affect the audience even stronger.

This paper's suggestion of how the episode manages to most affectively portray Brenda as materially abject bride without disrupting the narrative arc runs contrary to what is overtly being said in the form of Lisa's patriarchal propaganda, i.e. that Brenda is not, cannot be maternal. I will try to put forward that Brenda's maternity, culturally coded as abject per se (Wisker 22), is instead stressed by stylising her as earth-bound and earth-born, as corporeal, rather than spiritual. This argument will be pursued via an analysis of a sequence featuring a (hostile) conversation between Brenda and Lisa's ghost. These scenes take place during the reception, from which Brenda withdraws for some time to a quiet place with a wide view onto the sea (see Fig. 14) – a place that is very close to where Claire has taken the pictures of the wedding guests and where George has violated the cultural imperative of cleanliness. There, Lisa's ghost appears to a distressed and drunk Brenda and chastises her for her sexually uninhibited past as having caused her miscarriage¹¹².



Fig. 14: Brenda retreats to a quiet, yet not peaceful place

A sound bridge leads the viewer into the maritime setting: fainting music from the tent carries over to the shrieking of seagulls and the rushing of waves. The scene is thus framed by a smooth move away from culture, heading towards nature and corporeality (introduced by an obviously drunk Brenda taking Vicodin and moving in a slightly inarticulate way). Via a tracking shot we follow Brenda as she moves from the staircase to the bench which was visible in the scenes of George spilling wine on his shirt, and where she now rests to take

¹¹² The technique of externalising the characters' inner emotions (fears, internal combat) by letting them talk to a deceased person is not usually applied to Brenda. In this respect, this scene is conspicuous for the

painkillers with champagne. The camera moves in on Brenda and when it comes to rest in a medium close-up, Lisa's voice is heard offscreen: "You don't have to worry about it being like my wedding". Brenda looks up and in an eyeline match Lisa is depicted in a long shot¹¹³. Framed with bright colours (light-blue sky, sun-lit grass and girls with white dresses form her background), Lisa's appearance is unexpected and conspicuous – not least because she is wearing her wedding dress (see Fig. 15).



Fig 15: The emergence of Lisa's ghost

Lisa's ghost as projection of Brenda's inner combat goes on to question Brenda's 'naturalness' and maternity ("But I was always maternal, unlike you"), suggesting that because of her sexually uninhibited past ("You are a slutbag. You were."), Brenda is being punished with her miscarriage by a higher order ("All the moments in your life have led to this one."). Standing with arms aggressively stemmed against her hips and voicing a bunch of patriarchal clichés, Lisa is filmed from a low angle. Contrastingly, Brenda is depicted in a high angle shot as she is sitting on the bench and silently, albeit impatiently, listening. At first sight, the scene thus seems to portray a quite pronounced power hierarchy¹¹⁴. However, the most interesting aspect, particularly in regard to the representation of Brenda as mad bride, does not necessarily concern power relations, but rather has to do with the two women's contrasting stylisations as either corporeal, or spiritual.

portrayal of Brenda in the whole series. In fact, Brenda has such scenes only in the late episodes of the final season in which she talks to the then deceased Nate.

¹¹³ Facing Brenda, she seems to have basically come out of nowhere, but a connection with the ocean is certainly implied as she is walking parallel to the hedge, which as yet hides the view onto the sea.

¹¹⁴ In fact, this hierarchy is not entirely straight-forward anyway, as the camera follows Brenda's movements and consistently privileges her point of view.

While the amount of exposure to the audience is largely the same for both women (Brenda is given 16, Lisa 15 shots), the characters' backgrounds differ markedly. The shots allocated to Brenda are broken down into 14 shots showing her against a background which I call for reasons of practicality 'earth' (in rather darkly coloured frames we see various plants, hills, grass, the aforementioned bench and a gravel path, see Fig. 14 and 17), and two with the sea as her background. Lisa, on the other hand, is portrayed with the background 'earth' in only three shots, while the remaining twelve shots depict her with the ocean behind. While in some shots this differentiation cannot be exercised unambiguously (several shots feature 'sea' as well as 'earth'), all those close-ups in which the background is out of focus – thus those shots that conventionally suggest close psychological introspection (Yale film studies) – strictly follow this pattern¹¹⁵. Consequently, the stylisation by means of a particular background seems to be an important technique in character portrayal and therefore promises to reveal vital aspects for further analysis.

Lisa's ghost is depicted as Ophelia wearing a white dress as well as ornaments that resemble delicate, barely visible twigs and flowers in her loose hair (see Fig. 16), just as the visual conventions of the Elizabethan stage would have it¹¹⁶. On the diegetic level, Lisa might indeed be called a 'thwarted bride', to use the expression with which Clair Hughes describes Shakespeare's Ophelia. The failing of their marriage is repeatedly suggested in the show and, despite a faint glimpse of Nate and Lisa creating a new discourse of marriage right before her disappearance (see Johnson 34-35), largely goes undisputed. Accordingly, Brenda explicitly questions Lisa's legitimacy as Nate's bride: "You're just bitter because you had to get pregnant to get Nate to marry you!"¹¹⁷.

¹¹⁵ These shots are linked in a conventional shot-reverse-shot sequence depicting a conversation via a series of over-the-shoulder framings.

¹¹⁶ Elaine Showalter draws attention to the sexual ambivalence inherent to these conventions: loose hair indicates improper sensuality, flowers point towards a 'deflowering' act, and a death in drowning symbolises female fluidity (11).

¹¹⁷ Dissimilar to Ophelia, Lisa may have gotten her man, but, having tricked him into wedlock, her death in drowning might be read as *her* punishment – if we want to pursue this quite misogynistic reading. Indeed, the idea that years of promiscuity have damaged Brenda's insides is rendered absurd in the context of the series' narrative. We might recall that *Lisa's* guts have exploded and turned into cream, thus that in fact *her* insides have been severely damaged due to her drowning. We might also recall the strong implication that her adulterous affair with her brother-in-law, thus *her* promiscuous past, has brought about this death in some way or the other.



Fig. 16: Lisa as Ophelia

Notably, the sequence does not make use of jump cuts to underscore that Lisa as ghost is not bound to physical laws, and to additionally stress that Lisa is imagined in Brenda's head¹¹⁸. Instead, it follows the conventions of continuity editing and it is Brenda, rather than Lisa, who is frequently moving and leaving the frame with Lisa merely following Brenda's jerky movements in a contrastingly smooth way. It could be argued that Brenda's agitation and inability to rest serves the function of stressing Brenda's flesh-and-blood corporeality. We can deduce from her movements that she is drunk, which gives her portrayal a pronounced bodily aspect. As has been pointed out, we also see right at the beginning of the sequence that she is taking painkillers – thus, we are made aware again that Brenda has recently miscarried and is suffering from bodily pain (and, arguably, psychological distress, hence the champagne).

As Mary Russo points out, the cavernous (grotto-esque) female body is (metaphorically) linked to the “[l]ow, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral” (1). Accordingly, Brenda is depicted with an earthy, rather dark background that directly contrasts with the light, unlimited space that forms Lisa's background. Whereas Lisa is represented as purely spiritual, non-corporeal ghost, Brenda is depicted as sensually connected to physical earth. This reading is supported by dialogue as Brenda explicitly cites the aforementioned contrast in her speech questioning Lisa's legitimacy as Nate's wife (which by the way is edited according to the pattern Lisa/ocean, Brenda/earth): “You will never feel his arms around you again, you'll never feel the air on your skin, or wake up in a warm bed. You're done. You don't get the chance to try again for anything”. “Feel”, “air”, “skin”, “warm” are the

¹¹⁸ This technique is sometimes employed in the series, particularly when the ghost is telling some uncomfortable truth, or is menacing.

keywords of this passage and serve as a shorthand for ‘corporeality’, ‘sensuality’ and ‘naturalness’, which portray Brenda as sensual, physical (and possibly abject) human being who *does* have the chance to try again, i.e. to have a child – thus Brenda is represented as, to use a rather daring phrase, Mother Earth¹¹⁹.



Fig. 17: Brenda as Mother Earth

Brenda’s physicality is constantly stressed in the scenes with Lisa’s ghost and the subsequent scene with Nate. Her severe identity crisis makes her bodily and verbal articulations uncontrolled, which Lisa mockingly comments with: “I’m bitter? Who’s drunk and yelling at a dead woman?”. Different from the episode’s beginning, which has constructed Brenda as perfectionist bridezilla, in these scenes we actually see Brenda’s body as largely freeing itself from social constraints and bridal decorum. Like the unruly woman, she *is* making a spectacle of herself, she indeed drinks and yells (Nate observes: “You are really upset, maybe you shouldn’t be drinking”) – and in doing so, she obviously opts against slavish adherence to perfectly constructed boundaries, which is visually stressed by her repeatedly leaving the frame. The spectator is teased by Brenda’s visually enhanced corporeality and her emotional breakdown and might wonder whether in the course of her violations of borders, also her abject blood might spill over the tight confines of her body and dress. As abject woman she is walking a tightrope by “[...] abandon[ing] her oppressive confinement to the category of the beautiful” (Covino 2). Due to her uncontrolled physicality,

¹¹⁹ The image of Brenda as Mother Earth is even more pronounced in the episode in which Nate is buried and pregnant Brenda is sitting barefooted on the ground, surrounded by dug out heaps of earth (‘All Alone’ 5:10). As typical of valorising representations of this female type, a “[...] natural connection between the female body (itself naturalized) and the “primal” elements, especially the earth” (Russo 1) is suggested. Also, the image seems to purport the (problematic) view that the maternal woman, in contrast to the ‘proper’ subject that is completely integrated in the Symbolic order, “[...] remains tied to nature and is thus still at least in part ‘archaic’” (Gelder 51).

the prospect of an abjected, gory bridal gown is frighteningly real and seems always on the verge of materialisation: her bodily, earthly immediateness, combined with the recurring motif of breaking, tearing or, indeed, violence directed against Brenda's skin and body¹²⁰, heightens the spectator's sense that any moment her blood may break through the boundaries of body, pad and dress and thus may visibly manifest on the bridal gown. Also George's spilling of red wine might be read as a prolepsis hinting at future bloodshed. Red wine as anticipating the emergence of blood is a well-known motif used in, for instance, D.H. Lawrence's "The Prussian Officer" or Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (Barry 226). Conditioned to record and interpret such proleptic details, the audience is never released from the anticipation and the grip exercised by the affective motif. While being present on the viewer's mind (blood on virginal white as dreaded and desired), yet absent on screen, the motif's affective power becomes most effective and as "[...] devotees of the abject, [we] do not cease looking, within what [might] flow[...] from the other's "innermost being", for the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body" (Kristeva 54). As has been indicated repeatedly, the overwhelming power exercised by the maternal, in Freud's conception uncanny, body stems from a "[...] longing to fall back into the maternal chora as well as a deep anxiety over the possibility of losing one's subjectivity" (McAfee 49).

¹²⁰ In this scene, Brenda defiantly throws her empty glass over the hedge and towards the ocean – we hear it break. She further articulates her desire to be hit. Shortly after the miscarriage she states to prefer swallowing razor blades or throwing herself under a bus over cancelling the caterer. The most pictorial violation of Brenda's integrity of skin (and identity) is a collage that Claire makes out of pieces showing facial features of Brenda and Nate (see Fig. 18), which Claire hallucinates to be violently stabbed and cut by Billy with a knife. The collage functions to shatter the boundary between self and other on various levels. First, it exposes the notion of a unified, closed body/identity to be a chimera by laying bare processes in which disparate pieces make up a face. Second, Claire imagines Billy launching into a fantasy of merging identities that cannot be separated any more. He mistakes the pieces showing Brenda's face to be his own facial features and, before stabbing the collage, culminates in the assertion "She is me!"



Fig. 18: Brenda's violated skin

Also on the most mundane level, Brenda seems to be distancing herself from the belittling aesthetic category of the beautiful. Contrasting Lisa's pronounced romantic dress embroidered with feminine lace, Brenda is wearing Nate's jacket over her dress. Other than a conventional marker of masculinity, it most plausibly functions as a visual indicator of Brenda's (female, abject) corporeality. Able to feel pain, able to wake up in a warm bed or feel the air on her skin, Brenda naturally is also able to feel cold on her skin, which considerably contrasts with Lisa's ethereal 'ghostness'. Lisa, the non-body, enters the scene in the same wedding attire that is featured in the wedding video: ultimately, Lisa is the dead woman in this scene, while Brenda, adapting to her environment by putting on a jacket, is bodily, earthly, alive. Also, the black jacket merges with her dark background, which expands her body-image beyond the boundaries of her body (note that a fusion of the body and its surroundings is typical of the grotesque (Bakhtin (310-317)) – a body that is open, protruding, unconfined and utterly present. This body's pronounced presence and proximity to the earth, as I have tried to illustrate, makes up for the lacking visibility of her abject state, the materialisation of her bridal madness, by ever posing the threat to spill over, to violate the confines of "[...] everything her culture finds beautiful" (Hughes 157).

In Lisa's bluntly misogynistic speech functioning as projection of Brenda's internal struggles, the motif of collapsing boundaries can be traced once again. The desire to cleanly separate mother and whore, the natural and the "fucked up" woman, hints at the Western desire to firmly establish the contours of one's identity in ways outlined in 1.1.. In giving birth, as well as in miscarriage, these contours are vehemently shattered. The maternal body as a privileged site of liminality and defilement signifies "[...] flayed identity [,] the height of

bloodshed and life, scorching moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death), horror and beauty [...]” (Kristeva 155). By discussing Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s work, Kristeva also comes to write about thwarted maternity and its discourses – it is here that Brenda’s fears are located. Lisa’s ghost evokes the image of damaged female interiority and explicitly links it to Brenda’s boundary-transgressing promiscuity (“Your insides must have gotten damaged from all that anonymous cock”), which might be read as indicator of her excessive subject position in general.

Kristeva argues that the fear of collapsing dichotomies is directly connected to “[...] the persecuting power of the mother [...]” (159). This power stems from her ability to reproduce (Kristeva 77), which poses a “[...] constant threat to conventional order and control” (Goodnow 43) as it questions notions of the unified subject. Taking the Viennese doctor Ignaz Semmelweis’s observations about puerperal fever¹²¹ and Céline’s fictionalisations thereof as starting point, she reads the joining of opposites (here: life and death) as “[...] a panic hallucination of the inside’s destruction, of an interiorization of death following the abolishment of limits and differences” (Kristeva 159). She further points out that the remedy against this infection of life by death “[o]nce more [...] involves separating, not touching, dividing, washing” (Kristeva 160). This observation need not exclusively work in relation to the discourse of medicine, but also applies to culturally constructed narratives of femininity: dichotomies must be cleanly separated in order to guarantee a valid version of maternity. Traits of ‘mother’ must not touch traits of ‘whore’, naturalised opposites must not be diluted or subverted in a ‘mad’ way – a patriarchal imperative of separateness¹²² that the white wedding reinforces and most cruelly demands from the bride, who is supposed to stay within the paralysing confines of the beautiful.

By merging what should be separate, by engaging in a form of excess we have attributed to the mad bride, Brenda refuses to stay within these narrow boundaries and rather exercises the sublime, affective power of the (maternal) abject. As has been argued, this is reinforced by means of Brenda’s portrayal as bodily and earth-born. Interestingly, the show

¹²¹ An infection which develops during childbirth and is brought about by female genitalia being contaminated by a corpse. It can be prevented by washing one’s hands after having been in contact with corpses.

¹²² “[...] what patriarchy has turned into two aspects of one woman – the two separate and opposite extremes of good (asexual) and evil (sexual), Mary vs. Eve. (Tatum 83). Applying Lisa’s lens in reading Brenda’s body, she simultaneously signifies excess (she has had too much anonymous sex) and lack (she apparently is unable to bear children) – this ambiguity renders her body inadequate, as it “[...] only approximates femaleness in a culture which identifies the body of the mother with the female body [...]” (Russo 110).

would traditionally and intentionally depict Brenda with water in her background¹²³, symbolising, as creator Alan Ball argues in the DVD commentary to the pilot, the permeability of her character and the resistance of being confined to one particular role (“because she is a person whose boundaries are so much more fluid than those other characters in the show, who have such very tight boundaries”¹²⁴). And it is Lisa who used to be portrayed as particularly earth-bound: her New Age sensibilities concerning animals, the environment etc., often enough serve as a running joke: in the first episode that features her (‘Driving Mr Mossback’ 2:4), she considers turning down a film producer’s job offer because she objects to the fact that film is processed with gelatine that comes from horse hooves, and above her toilet we can read a signpost (decorated with hand-made drawings of mountaintops and trees) saying “If it’s yellow, let it mellow. If it’s brown, flush it down”. In the same episode, Lisa is depicted as crawling on the floor and literally talking to ants, creatures living in the earth, as well as motherly comforting Nate (who realises the possible fatality of his brain condition, AVM) with “Poor baby. It’s OK, I’m here”. Thus, it used to be rather Lisa who was stylised as Mother Earth, which makes her and Brenda’s representations in their confrontational scenes all the more conspicuous.

This chapter has tried to argue for Brenda’s subject position as ambiguous and excessive in its inclusiveness (she is marked ‘+maternal’ and ‘+sterile’, ‘+little girl’ and ‘+granny’, ‘+Mother Earth’ and ‘+slutbag’, ‘+open-eyed’ and ‘+short-sighted’, etc.). The boundaries of her identity have been shown to be fluid and ever changing. In line with the assumption that such excesses will materialise, Brenda’s leaking body has been described as severely troubling notions of the bridal body as mannered and clean. Even though the prospect of the bloody wedding dress is evoked several times, it is never visibly realised. This

¹²³ In the pilot alone, there are numerous examples of this stylistic device: she is shown in front of a swimming pool, water sprinklers, or framed with reflection of water (‘Pilot’, 1:1). In the course of the series, this way of portraying Brenda is kept. Its most pictorial manifestation is staged in ‘An Open Book’ (1:5): Brenda as child is standing in a mysterious garden and her image is reflected in a pool.

¹²⁴ Arguably, this apparently clear-cut dichotomy is not exercised without ambiguity, even though this truism is continually evoked until the end of the series. In a late episode, Brenda contrasts her and Nate’s upbringing: “So I grew up with parents who had no boundaries, you grew up with parents who had nothing but boundaries” (5:5 ‘Eat a Peach’). Interestingly, also the contours of Lisa’s character are repeatedly constructed as fluid: in her obituary speech, for instance, her sister Barb observes that Lisa did not believe in boundaries. More accurately, she is portrayed as hovering between these polarities and often enough reveals a side of her that is very controlling.

apparent lack, however, is made up by a pronounced portrayal of Brenda's corporeality and unruliness and the constant threat of materialisation that is thereby posed. The viewers are never at ease as the abject bridal dress is haunting us by its apparent absence. Ever on the verge to materialise, the gory dress exercises its grip on us. Brenda as the yelling, drinking, staggering and cursing female indeed seems to be "[...] dancing on a volcano" (Kristeva 210), to be moving towards "[...] a state where the carefully constructed borders between the meanings of male and female, human and animal, living and dead, clean and unclean, self and other, are continually liable to collapse" (Goodnow 30). Brenda as mad bride seems to be taking us towards a state where also the borders of the body might collapse and eventually reveal her abject interiority spilling over the confines of the beautiful.

In this state of collapsing boundaries we might trace a counter-discourse to the existing patriarchal myths of angelic motherhood and bridal decorum. By constructing and representing Brenda as mad bride, the tight boundaries that necessarily shape these versions of femininity are exposed as untenable – as is the myth of a perfectly fixed and stable identity (see 1.2. and 1.3.). It is perhaps too simplistic to interpret the conspicuously innovative¹²⁵ portrayal of both women (Brenda bound to earth, Lisa floating in water) as introducing a conventional narrative of female competition, in which Brenda is trying to take Lisa's place as mother and wife, and confining herself to the claustrophobic role of Mother Earth. Obviously, it cannot be denied that the shots depicting Brenda seem to suggest a more confined space than Lisa's seemingly unlimited background. However, as has been argued, these stylisations more plausibly serve to contrast bodily and spiritual realms, rather than difference in agency – thus, they stress Brenda's abject corporeality, which, as has been argued, is a manifestation of her ambiguous, boundary-transgressing subject position. While the scenes do make explicit use of established metaphors (such as earth symbolising the reproductive female), they seem to offer alternate ways of reading them.

Crucially, maternity is neither equated with feminine naturalness, nor presented as the ultimate goal a woman can/must pursue: the episode explicitly troubles such popular notions in a story line in which David and Keith consider hiring a surrogate for their child. After having had a grotesque horror vision that depicts the search for the perfect surrogate as a

¹²⁵ Innovative in the context of the series, not in the portrayal of female characters as such.

brutal, misogynistic TV show, David realises that he cannot “[...] just rent out some woman’s uterus like it’s a storage locker”. Motherhood is thus denaturalised and demystified as potentially working as exploitation of the female body. More specifically, maternity is exposed as an intrinsic part of patriarchal exchange – one ‘candidate’ puts on her most charming smile and disturbingly pleads: “I’m hoping you pick me so I won’t have to resort to more obvious forms of prostitution to get out of debt”. It seems an important point to make that Brenda ultimately is not confined to the patriarchal ideal of unblemished maternity – or any other version of femininity for that matter. On the contrary, ‘A Coat of White Primer’ eventually exposes neatly separated and naturalised categories and identities, such as being maternal, or being a ‘slutbag’ as untenable¹²⁶.

At first sight, this assertion must seem puzzling. Having violated the boundaries of a woman’s acceptable social behaviour by occupying an ambiguous, excessive subject position which constantly poses the threat of abject materialisation, Brenda indeed seems to be abjected, literally pushed to the fringes of society. Drunk and leaking Brenda’s retreat from her own wedding feast to a lonely place could be read as symbolising social abjection. Before disappearing, Lisa’s ghost reinforces this reading by articulating Brenda’s identity as being incompatible with normative, bourgeois happiness: “Every time you try to have a nice normal life, you fuck it up. You’ll never gonna have your little happily-ever-after moment, no matter how many white veils you put on, honey. You’re just too fucked up for all that. Maybe you should just accept that, instead of trying to be something you’re not”. In this speech, Lisa addresses the notion of a fixed, unchanging core that makes one’s identity unique – in Brenda’s case, this core invariably is “just too fucked up”. Furthermore, Lisa carefully separates the female identity ‘slutbag’ from the “something” Brenda is not, presumably a loving mother who lives happily ever after – or, at least, has a “nice normal life”. In her distress, Brenda seems to have internalised these narratives that are built on boundaries, dichotomies and cleanly separated categories. After all, she reads the abject condition of her body as her punishment for violating these boundaries: “It’s so perfect: the only way I get to get married in the long white gown is to have my dead baby leaking out of me all day. That’s me, that’s what I get for my wedding”.

¹²⁶ Chapter 6.3. addresses issues of essentialism and maternity in relation to Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject.

But what exactly is that “something”, which, according to Lisa’s ghost, Brenda is not? I want to suggest that what Brenda is *not* is a cleanly separated type of femininity that neatly fits into one of the categories supplied by patriarchal discourse. Largely by applying Kristeva’s theory of the abject, this chapter has tried to lay bare Brenda’s manifold transgressions of boundaries that make her an example of the mad bride. What thwarts Brenda’s vision of the perfect wedding is thus not some unruly essence of her identity that cannot be covered up, “no matter how many white veils” she puts on, but rather the *lack* of any stable essence. As Erin MacLeod convincingly demonstrates, Brenda constantly narrates and adopts new versions of her ‘self’, and ever defers a sense of ‘true’ identity (144). Clearly, this aspect is most obvious in the first two seasons, in which Brenda, creating and performing identities with remarkable spontaneity and ease, repeatedly produces counter-narratives to all too simple definitions others try to impose on her¹²⁷. However, also in her most experimental phase as regards the active, independent creation of different identities that counteract patriarchal narratives about her¹²⁸, she still seems to long for the completeness and coherence promised by culturally acclaimed feminine identities: ambivalently, she is drawn to these roles while she simultaneously rejects them (MacLeod 138) – we might recall the introduction of herself as ‘fuck puppet’, rather than ‘girlfriend’. In ‘A Coat of White Primer’ Brenda’s search for a more coherent, somewhat stable identity is brought to a climax – and painfully thwarted.

Brenda laments that she has spent six months “[...] planning [her] stupid fucking dream wedding”. Similar to Nate in season 2, she apparently wanted to believe in the stability promised by the rigidly set boundaries of patriarchal exchange structures (such as the white wedding) and traditional forms of femininity (such as the shining bride). In these six months, Brenda seems to have willingly committed herself to the “[...] surreal story of perfection” (Anderson 106) that is the wedding. We can perhaps understand why Brenda has temporarily been drawn to this story and has short-sightedly made every effort to conform: being told over again and again, this story powerfully lulls us in its ubiquity, in its promise of a predictable,

¹²⁷ While in the first season the playful aspect of this active and deliberate formation of self is pronounced, the second season depicts it as a rather desperate (and necessarily endless) attempt to find a narrative that somehow captures a glimpse of a satisfactory ‘real’ self (MacLeod 144). In a rather simplistic move, the show distils Brenda’s promiscuity from her experiments, which is later termed an addiction.

¹²⁸ Such as *Charlotte Light and Dark*, the supposedly full account of her personality (MacLeod 137).

yet “[...] exquisite experience tied up in beautiful silk ribbons and bows [...]” (Anderson 106) and seemingly defined existences. Only, this is a tale Brenda cannot control herself, but one that rather exercises tight control on her identity and body. Similar to the psychological treatment she had to undergo during childhood, the Western white wedding turns out to be built on “[...] infinite prescription and constant surveillance” (MacLeod 137). The ritual might perhaps even be read as functioning like a Panopticon in which particularly the pristine bridal gown plays a paramount role. The whiteness of the dress threatens to cruelly make visible every hint of not serene, unbecoming, abject corporeality. While Brenda tries to conform to the standards of contained femininity and the clean, mannered bridal body for a considerably long time, she eventually exposes the “stupid tent, dumb-ass wedding band” as “such a fucking cliché”. After all, she realises that letting her existence be defined by “[...] exacting standards [...]” (Anderson 106) is “[...] a pathetic attempt to become something [she] is not”.

It is important to note that the ‘something’ Brenda allegedly is not, should not be equated with a happy, angelic version of herself that does deserve and eventually get her “[...] little happily-ever-after moment [...]” in a romantic haven of heterosexual marriage, but that what she is not, is an identity that can be defined “[...] from light to dark, black and white, beginning to end” (MacLeod 137). Brenda ultimately does *not* docilely stay within the rigidly set boundaries of socially sanctioned forms of femininity which are separated from unruly roles, but claims a subject position of ambiguity and excess that is in line with this paper’s definition of the mad bride. If, as both Sally R. Munt and Leslie Heywood argue, *Six Feet Under* exemplifies the unattainability of hetero-normative ideals, this is most pronounced in the legal validation of heterosexuality, the Western white wedding. ‘A Coat of White Primer’ exposes the tight boundaries of what is supposed to be a “dream wedding”, a “special day”, a perfect bride, or, more generally, an invariably stable identity, to not only “[...] bring a feeling of dullness, of boredom and sterility [...]” (Goodnow 10), but ultimately to drain all life out – as Nate’s robotic “Let’s do this thing” and his shallow assertion to feel “alive” all to painfully expose.

After all, Brenda is open-eyed and realises that not only, as Margaret puts it, “[t]hat boat has sailed”¹²⁹, but that, indeed, taking “that boat” never was a viable option anyway. It is the

¹²⁹ “Honey, you don’t have to worry about everything going right anymore.”

chimera of perfection that vampirically sucks all life out, or, more accurately, does not leave any space for identities to be lived. This hermetically sealed identity is not liveable for Brenda – not because of some unruly essence inextricably tied to her ‘self’, but because her identity cannot be accounted for in the essentialist terms that the rigidly corseted identity of bride seems to demand. The episode ends in a utopic vision: disrupting the myth of one’s wedding day being the epitome of bliss, Nate appropriates the discourse of marriage in a queer, optimistic outlook: “I’m glad today sucked cos I wouldn’t want the happiest day of our life to be over already [...] it’s coming, right, it’s coming.” Even though it is Nate who voices this innovative prospect, loose-mouthed Brenda has the last word: “It fucking better be.” Furthermore, in this vision we can read Brenda’s ways of engaging with rigid narratives trying to impose a fixed identity upon her, which, put in most general terms, are narratives of deferral (see also MacLeod), inclusion rather than exclusion of possibilities¹³⁰. In bodily terms, this inclusivity concerns the dilution of boundaries within the binaries self/other, inside/outside, as well as being both life-giving and life-taking and intermingling dead and living matter. Located at a semantic crossroads, these overdeterminations surface as bodily excesses: Brenda’s fluid, incontinent and outgrowing body repeatedly pollutes clean, supposedly comfortable or other much valued sites (kitchen, bathroom, bed, the ritual of the white wedding). In terms of identity, she ambivalently embodies conflicting types of femininity and ultimately subverts conventionally established hierarchies within binary oppositions (angel/whore, Mother Earth/slutbag). Thus, Brenda provides a counter-narrative to bride, as well as a glimpse of the disruptive power held by the mad bride. As mad bride, Brenda is by no means reduced to the story of this day, but powerfully reaches out – via her body and her identity.

¹³⁰ Ultimately, this marriage does not prove that innovative either – but that is another story (for discussions of

8. Conclusion and Outlook

I have started this thesis by questioning why it was the role of *bride*, and not that of, say, Playmate, that irretrievably brought Anna Nicole Smith's popularity to a halt and relegated her to a place of social abjection. This paper has made an effort to lay bare the mechanisms of control that the Western white wedding exercises over the bride. Via "[...] infinite prescription and constant surveillance" (MacLeod 137)¹³¹, standards of 'becoming', i.e. clean, white, beautiful, stable and contained female identity and body are imposed on brides. Furthermore, the necessity of this tight control has been illuminated: being in the *process* of becoming, i.e. coming into existence, the fluid, performative identity of bride might move in directions that are not only 'unbecoming', but indeed quite "[...] beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (Kristeva 1).

Accordingly, the notion of bride as confined to the beautiful, accountable, graspable is continually reinstated in our cultural narrative. Arguably, this narrative is told along lines of excluding standards and boundaries, which construct and implement apparently natural constants of bride. As the personal and social order is constructed by means of the "[...] distinctions we draw between opposites: self/other, me/not me, living/dead, male/female, infant/child [...]" (Goodnow 6), the bride, as a type of femininity constructed by this order, must align herself to one particular, evidently the patriarchally approved and consensually validated, side of given dichotomies. She must not become monstrous by embodying, for instance, both human and animalistic, male and female, organic and inorganic traits – instead she is obliged to take a subject position that works along the lines of exclusion.

Perhaps we can understand better now why Anna Nicole Smith as bride was unpopular, even threatening. Extremely inclusive, she invades realms that are not supposed to be touched, 'contaminated' by her. Merging what should be separate, Smith as bride troubles boundaries and probes the limits of female containedness and bridal decorum. Thus, she challenges repressive hegemony, as well as exposes the Cartesian subject as a bounded unity that is predicated on the 'truth' of history and biology as chimera. She lays bare and disturbs the binary dichotomies on which the story of the Western white wedding is built and via

this aspect, see Johnson or Heywood).

¹³¹ The original quote tellingly refers to prison-like psychological observation and treatment.

which this narrative is implanted on us. Her identity and body is inclusive of all possibilities, of *both* polarities forming given dichotomies. In this respect, Smith can be aligned to a variety of bridal characters advocating alternative, more inclusive narratives of bride. Among these mad brides are, for instance, Bertha Rochester, Miss Havisham, Lucy Ashton, as well as Alexander McQueen's bride, who troubles the lines separating doll, machine and human and thereby offers an intriguing renegotiation of the notion of bride. I have chosen to focus primarily on Brenda Chenoweth and have addressed in my analysis questions of feminine identity and female body by employing a framework of binaries. In particular, this thesis has tried to crack open naturalised conceptions of bridal identity, beauty, decorum and agency, expose them as arbitrary, and trace a counter-discourse that embraces 'madness'.

In order to question the stable boundaries of the Cartesian subject, which, arguably, profoundly shapes the standards of bridal confinement, this study has worked with deconstructive reading methods as well as psychoanalytic theory, in particular Julia Kristeva's abject. Applying these epistemological lenses, any sense of a unified, fixed subject has been disrupted: after all, it is fluidity that characterises many theories of the psychoanalytic subject. Especially Kristeva's theory describes subjectivity as "[...] a perpetual work in progress [...]" (Becker-Leckrone 27), within which definite origins and endings cannot be traced. Furthermore, in her account the subject is constituted through a primary loss, which means that it is "[...] always already divided, negative" (Becker-Leckrone 23). Crucially, not only the subject's *origins* are viewed as being located in a crisis but, even more radically troubling to notions of stability, crisis is understood as the *permanent* marker throughout its whole being (Becker-Leckrone 24-30).

Fluidity, progress, lack of definition – these are those aspects of bride that have to be tightly regulated within a normative, hegemonic discourse. In Kristeva's conception, the abject is depicted exactly along these terms: defying any categorisation, it is truly ambiguous ("Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either" (Kristeva 2)). The similarly ambiguous figure of the *mad* bride has proved to provide an intriguing counter-narrative to the exacting standards of bridal identity and body. It has been argued that what links together all these mad brides swarming in our cultural narratives is a particular form of 'madness': the unruly embodiment of opposed binaries (A/B). The convergence of these polarities, which, of course, are ideological categories, disrupts and disorients any expectancies of what is 'natural'. Unifying

A *and* B in their identity and body, these brides take a subject position of excess, which typically materialises in abject ways. My main example of such a mad bride, *Six Feet Under*'s Brenda Chenoweth constantly violates given boundaries. Shattering the contours of identity and body, she breaches the notion of the well-defined bride who may be securely located in an invariably logical process. Brenda's body does not docilely stay within the confines of 'clean and mannered' but constantly is on the verge of spilling over its own boundaries. Furthermore, she takes a subject position of conflict, ambiguity and excess and thereby troubles the notion of a fixed core that defines a stable (bridal) identity.

The results gathered in this paper's practical analysis seem to suggest that Kristeva's emphasis on the maternal, the overarching presence of the mother in her discourse, is mirrored in representations and constructions of the mad bride, too. Kristeva notes that "[a]bjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be [...]" (10) – in our confrontation with the abject we re-experience the necessity of rupture from the maternal body. Accordingly, we can note that "[i]n Kristevan terms, the alien (m)other is totally abject: her body is characterised by an exoskeletal inversion of inside/outside; it oozes viscid mucous, signifier of excessive fecundity and surely a visual substitute for menstrual flow [...]" (Davis 252). Also Barbara Creed has taken up this stance and has argued that woman's portrayal as monster almost always is exercised in relation to her maternal reproductive function. Maternity also takes a special place in 'A Coat of White Primer': Brenda's apparent lack of "maternal" qualities shatters her sense of identity while her miscarrying/pregnant body repeatedly spills over its confines. Thus, abject materialisations of her 'madness' largely stem from her ambiguous bodily status as (m)other.

This paper is primarily concerned with the elaboration of a viable model of the mad bride and has made a first step in exploring the possibilities of practical application. Thereby also more specific aspects featuring in constructions of the mad bride have been addressed: the sublime power of the gory wedding dress has been argued to grip us well beyond the boundaries of the beautiful; the possible externalisation of a bridal body's interiority has been discussed as a hint towards castrating, gory desires of woman. For possible future research it might be rewarding to take a close look on a wider range of such specific aspects relevant to the conception of the mad bride. Other manifestations of bridal transgressions might include

the reflection of the characters' indecisive subject position in ambiguity of name: Called names, renamed, misnamed, the fluidity of the mad bride may not only surface in her bodily transgressions, but in her name(s) as well. We might think of Bertha Mason/Rochester, whose name is problematized in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*: the bride here emerges as Antoinette Cosway or Antoinette Mason, as well as Antoinetta/Marionetta (Rhys 100) and is ultimately renamed 'Bertha' (Rhys 70, 86).

Also the mad bride discussed most extensively in this paper displays ambiguity in name. Brenda is misnamed as 'Linda' once (note that this name may be read as combination of 'Brenda' and 'Lisa'), renames herself as 'Candace' and 'Jasmine', or tries to stay anonymous altogether. Her fictional alter egos include 'Christina' (the protagonist of her autobiographical novella (Soloway 156-161) as well as of her childhood poetry (Wright *poetry* 57)), 'Isabel' (from her favourite book as a child, *Nathaniel and Isabel*) and 'Charlotte' (featured in the infamous *Charlotte Light and Dark*). Miss Havisham is misnamed as 'Miss Estavisham' (Dickens 104), which hints at an abject merging of age (this name melts 'Havisham' and 'Estella') similar to the ambiguous relation between Brenda's and Margaret's body discussed above. Other aspects of interest might include the garden as a site of masquerade (Carter's Melanie and Rhys' Antoinette), the mad bride and her darker M/other, as well as the confusion of a nourishing bond and food loathing (Miss Havisham's wedding cake, Bertha's cannibalism).

In any case, the mad bride should offer a valuable model for reading transgressions of boundaries that in particular might frame reconsiderations of the notion of bride. Standards of the female body and dress as contained rather than open might be reassessed via the mad bride. The model also enables us to understand the attraction and repulsion characteristic of the gory wedding dress, as well as of the wearer herself. Via the mad bride I have touched the fluidity of 'bride', varieties of excess, troubled identity, economic dependencies and power as well as the convergence and conflict of apparently fixed dichotomies. By embracing 'madness', it has been hinted at, we can perhaps look behind the veil of "[...] the ubiquitous story, told over and again, to young girls and women about the wedding day" (Anderson 106) that works so powerfully in "[...] reproducing patriarchal marital relations" (Currie 403). Thereby this "[...] surreal story of perfection" (Anderson 106), i.e. the adherence to very particular standards and mechanisms of exclusion, might just be told anew.

9. References

9.1. Bibliography

Akass, Kim, and Janet McCabe. Introduction: 'Why do people have to die?' 'To make contemporary television drama important, I guess'. *Reading Six Feet Under. TV To Die For*. Ed. by Akass and McCabe. London: Tauris, 2005. 1-18.

Anderson, Heather D. S.. "Artist's Statement." *Frontiers* 27 (2006): 106-107.

Angerer, Eva. "Die Literaturtheorie Julia Kristevas: von Tel Quel zur Psychoanalyse." Diss. U of Vienna, 2001.

Arnold, Rebecca. "The Brutalized Body." *Fashion Theory* 3 (1999): 487-502.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M.. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996.

Ball, Joanne Dubbs, and Caroline Torem-Craig. *Wedding Traditions: Here Comes the Bride*. Dubuque: Antique Trader Books, 1997.

Barker, Chris. "Identity." *The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies*. London: Sage, 2004.

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory. An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3rd ed. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009.

Becker-Leckrone, Megan. *Julia Kristeva and Literary Theory*. Transitions. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

"Becoming." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1989. Online version June 2011.

Bell, Vikki. "Taking her hand: Becoming, time and the cultural politics of the white wedding." *Cultural Values* 2 (1998): 463-484.

Belsey, Catherine. *Desire. Love Stories in Western Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.

Berressem, Hanjo. "On the Matter of Abjection." *The Subject of Desire: The Aestheticization of the Unaesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture*. Ed. Konstanze Kutzbach and Monika Mueller. Amstersam: Rodopi, 2007. 19-48.

Billen, Andrew. "In the midst of death, we are in life." Rev. of *Six Feet Under*, created by Alan Ball. *New Statesman*. 17 June 2002: 46.

"Bride." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1989. Online version June 2011.

"Bridezilla." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1989. Online version December 2011.

Bromwich, David. "The sublime before aesthetics and politics." *Raritan* 16.4 (1997): 30-51.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. 1847. Ed. Margaret Smith. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

Brown, Jeffrey A.. "Class and feminine excess: The strange case of Anna Nicole Smith." *Feminist Review* 81 (2005): 74-94.

Bruzzi, Stella and Pamela Church-Gibson. "'Fashion is the Fifth Character': Fashion, Costume and Character in Sex and the City." *Reading Sex and the City*. Ed. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe. London: Tauris, 2003. 115-129.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Carter, Angela. *The Magic Toyshop*. 1967. London: Virago, 2006.

Chambers, Samuel A.. "Telepistemology of the Closet; or, The Queer Politics of *Six Feet Under*." *The Journal of American Culture* 26 (2003): 24-41.

Chanter, Tina. "Abjection, or Why Freud Introduces the Phallus: Identification, Castration, Theory, and the Logic of Fetishism." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XLII (2000): 48-66.

Charsley, Simon R.. *Wedding Cakes and Cultural History*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Cotto, Monica. "Pretty WOMEN." *National Jeweler*. 16 Apr. 2006, Vol. 100, Issue 8

Covino, Deborah Caslav. "Abject Criticism." *Genders OnLine Journals* 32 (2000). Ed. Kibbey, Ann. U of Colorado. 23 June 2011. <http://www.genders.org/g32/g32_covino.html>.

Creed, Barbara. "Kristeva, Femininity, Abjection." *The Horror Reader*. Ed. Ken Gelder. London: Routledge, 2000. 64-70.

Creed, Barbara. *The monstrous-feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 2005.

Currie, Dawn H.. "'Here comes the Bride': The Making of a 'Modern Traditional' Wedding in Western Culture." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 24.3 (1993): 403-421. Gale World History In Context. 8 Feb. 2012.

<<http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/whic/AcademicJournalsDetailsPage/AcademicJournalsDetailsWindow?displayGroupName=Journals&disableHighlighting=false&prodId=WHIC&action=e&windowstate=normal&catId=&documentId=GALE%7CA16465611&mode=view&userGroupName=43wien&jsid=99f1ee15d8be12aebd5e3603030a460>>

Davis, Michael. "“What’s the story mother?” Abjection and Anti-Feminism in *Alien* and *Aliens*.” *Gothic Studies* 2 (2000): 245-256.

DiCicco, Lorraine. “The Enfreakment of America’s “Jeune Fille à Marrier”: Lily Bart to Carrie Bradshaw.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 33 (2010): 78-98.

Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. 1861. London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994.

Dimovitz, Scott. ““I Was the Subject of the Sentence Written on the Mirror”: Angela Carter’s Short Fiction and the Unwriting of the Psychoanalytic Subject.” *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 21 (2010): 1-19.

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. 2nd impr. with corr.. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. London: Blackwell, 1996.

Ehrenreich, Barbara, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs. “Beatlemania: A Sexually Defiant Subculture?” *The Subcultures Reader*. Ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton. London: Routledge, 1997. 523-536.

England, Marcia. “Breached Bodies and Home Invasions: Horrific representations of the feminized body and home.” *Gender, Place and Culture* 13 (2006): 353-363.

Entwistle, Joanne. “Fashion and the Fleishy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice.” *Fashion Theory* 4 (2000): 323-348.

Evans, Caroline. “Masks, Mirrors and Mannequins: Elsa Schiaparelli and the Decentered Subject.” *Fashion Theory* 3 (1999): 3-32.

Felderer, Brigitte. “Thronzeugen.” *Rondo (Der Standard)* 29 Apr. 2011: 4-7.

Felman, Shoshana. “Women and Madness. The critical phallacy.” *Feminisms. An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997: 7-20.

Fer, Briony. *On abstract art*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1997.

Ferris, Julie and Karen Pitcher. “Object(ing) to the Abject: The excessive Bodies and Practices of Carnie Wilson and Anna Nicole Smith.” *Conference Papers. International Communication Association* (2005): 1-17.

Foley, Bridget. “Bridget Foley’s Diary: Finding *The Dress*.” *Women’s Wear Daily* 27 Apr. 2011. 5 February 2012 < <http://www.wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-features/finding-the-dress-3593371>>.

Foster, Hal. “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic.” *October* 78 (1996): 106-124.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. 2nd ed. New York: Vintage, 1995.

Friese, Susanne. "The Wedding Dress: From Use Value to Sacred Object." *Through the Wardrobe: Women's Relationship with Their Clothes*. Dress, Body, Culture. Ed. Ali Guy, Eileen Green, and Maura Banim. Oxford: Berg, 2001. 53-70.

Gamble, Sarah. "'You cannot impersonate what you are': Questions of Authenticity in the Neo-Victorian Novel." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 20 (2009): 126-140.

Gelder, Ken. Introduction to Part Two. *The Horror Reader*. Ed. Ken Gelder. London: Routledge, 2000. 49-51

Goodnow, Katherine J.. *Kristeva in Focus. From Theory to Film Analysis*. New York: Berhahn: 2010.

Grosz, Elizabeth. "Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit." *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. Ed. Rosemary Garland Thomson. New York: New York UP, 1996. 55-66.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.

Gutiérrez-Albilla, Julián Daniel. "Desublimating the Body: Abjection and the Politics of Feminist and Queer Subjectivities in Contemporary Art." *Angelaki. Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 13 (2008): 65-84.

Hall, Stuart. "The Work of Representation." *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Culture, Media and Identities. Ed. Stuart Hall. London: Sage 1997. 13-74.

Harradine, David. "Abject Identities and Fluid Performances: Theorizing the Leaky Body." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 10 (2000): 69-85.

Harris Walsh, Kristin. "'You just nod and pin and sew and let them do their thing': An Analysis of the Wedding Dress as an Artifact and Signifier." *Ethnologies* 27 (2005): 239-359.

Heard, Catherine. "The Persistence of Monsters." *Beauty and the Abject: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Ed. Leslie Boldt-Irons, Corrado Federici, and Ernesto Virgulti. New York: Peter Lang 2007. 29-39.

Heywood, Leslie. "'The Room' as 'Heterosexual Closet': The Life and Death of Alternative Relationalities in Six Feet Under." *Third Wave Feminism and Television. Jane Puts It in a Box*. Ed. Merri Lisa Johnson. London: I.B. Tauris 2007. 189-217.

Hughes, Clair. *Dressed in Fiction*. Oxford: Berg, 2006.

- Jarvis, Anthea. "The Dress Must Be White, and Perfectly Plain and Simple: Confirmation and First Communion Dress, 1850-2000." *Costume* 41 (2007): 83-98.
- Johnson, Merri Lisa. "From Relationship Autopsy to Romantic Utopia: The Missing Discourse of Egalitarian Marriage on HBO's *Six Feet Under*." *Discourse* 26 (2004): 18-40.
- Johnston, Belinda. "Renaissance Body Matters: Judith Butler and the Sex That Is One." *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 6 (2001): 77-94.
- Keltner, S.K. *Kristeva. Thresholds*. Cambridge: Polity, 2011.
- Krauss, Rosalind. "Informe without Conclusion." *October* 78 (Autumn 1996): 89-105.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Kutzbach, Konstanze, and Monika Mueller. "Introduction." *The Abject of Desire: The Aestheticization of the Unaesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture*. Ed. Konstanze Kutzbach and Monika Mueller. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 7-18.
- Lavery, David. "'It's not television, it's magic realism': the mundane, the grotesque and the fantastic in *Six Feet Under*." *Reading Six Feet Under. TV To Die For*. Ed. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe. London: Tauris, 2005. 19-38.
- Lawson, Mark. Foreword. *Reading Six Feet Under. TV To Die For*. Ed. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe. London: Tauris, 2005. xvii-xxii.
- Lechte, John. *Julia Kristeva. Critics of the twentieth century*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Die elementaren Strukturen der Verwandtschaft*. Trans. Eva Moldenhauer. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993.
- Lewis, Charles. "Hegemony in the Ideal: Wedding Photography, Consumerism, and Patriarchy." *Women's Studies in Communication* 20. 2 (1997): 167-188.
- MacLeod, Erin. "Desperately seeking Brenda: writing the self in *Six Feet Under*." *Reading Six Feet Under. TV To Die For*. Ed. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe. London: Tauris, 2005. 135-148.
- "Mad." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1989. Online version January 2012.
- Magennis, Caroline. "'... that great swollen belly': the abject maternal in some recent Northern Irish fiction." *Irish Studies Review* 18 (2010): 91-100.
- Margaroni, Maria. "Recent Work on and by Julia Kristeva: Toward a Psychoanalytic Social Theory." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32 (2007): 793-808.

Matrix, Sidney Eve, and Pauline Greenhill. "Wedding Realities: the Rules Have Changed... and They Haven't... /Les noces en vrai: Les règles changent... et restent les memes." *Ethnologies* 28 (2006): 5-28.

McAfee, Noëlle. *Julia Kristeva*. Routledge Critical Thinkers. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Mee, Janice, and Irina Safronova. "An Historic Perspective of English and Soviet Bridalwear between 1917 and 1960." *Wedding Dress Across Cultures*. Dress, Body, Culture. Ed. Helen Bradley Foster and Donald Clay Johnson. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 141-156.

Meyer, Michaela D. E., Amy M. Fallah and Megan M. Wood. "Gender, Media, and Madness: Reading a Rhetoric of Women in Crisis through Foucauldian Theory." *Review of Communication* 11 (2011): 216-228.

Mersch, Dieter. "Das Semiotische und das Symbolische: Julia Kristevas Beitrag zum Strukturalismus." *Von Michel Serres bis Julia Kristeva*. Rombach Wissenschaften. Reihe Litterae 69. Ed. Joseph Jurt. Freiburg: Rombach, 1999. 113-133.

Mickalites, Carey James. "The Abject Textuality of *The Secret Agent*." *Criticism* 50.3 (2008): 501-526.

Munt, Sally R.. "A Queer Undertaking. Anxiety and reparation in the HBO television drama series *Six Feet Under*." *Feminist Media Studies* 6 (2006): 263-279.

Nooy, Juliana de. *Derrida, Kristeva and the dividing line. An articulation of two theories of difference*. Comparative literature and cultural studies 5. New York: Garland, 1998.

Otnes, Cele and Tina M. Lowrey. "'Til Debt Do Us Part: The Selection and Meaning of Artifacts in the American Wedding." *Advances in Consumer Research* 20. Ed. Leigh McAlister and Michael L. Rothschild, Provo, UT : Association for Consumer Research (1993): 325-329. 6 February 2012

<<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/display.asp?id=7464>>.

Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. 1966. Ed. Hilary Jenkins. London: Penguin, 2001.

Ringrose, Jessica and Valerie Walkerdine. "Regulating the Abject. The TV make-over as site of neo-liberal reinvention toward bourgeois femininity." *Feminist Media Studies* 8 (2008): 227-246.

Russo, Mary J. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Salamon, Hagar and Esther Juhasz. "'Goddesses of Flesh and Metal". Gazes on the Tradition of Fattening Jewish Brides in Tunisia." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7 (2011): 1-38.

Schmitz, Bettina. *Arbeit an den Grenzen der Sprache. Julia Kristeva. Facetten*. Königstein: Helmer, 1998.

Scott, Sir Walter. *The Bride of Lammermoor. Tales of My Landlord. Third Series. Collected and arranged by Jedediah Cleishbotham. Vol III*. Edinburgh: Longman, 1819.

Seet, K K. "Mothers and Daughters: Abjection and the Monstrous-Feminine in Japan's *Dark Water* and South Korea's *A Tale of Two Sisters*." *Camera Obscura* 71. 24 (2009): 139-159.

Seidl, Monika "Beautiful Inside My Purse Forever: How the Young British Artists Cash in on Death and Memorial Culture." *Birth and Death*. Annual Conference of the German Association for the Study of British Cultures, Bochum, 18-20 November 2010.

Seidl, Monika. "British Fashion and Romanticism Today: Where the Present Dreams the Past Future." *Romanticism Today: Selected Papers from the Tübingen Conference of the German Society for English Romanticism*. Ed. Lars Eckstein and Christoph Reinfandt. Trier: WVT, 2009. 213-226.

Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*. New York: Pantheon, 1986.

Smith, Anna. *Julia Kristeva. Readings of exile and estrangement*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996.

Sobal, Jefferey, Caron Bove, and Barbara Rauschenbach. "Weight and Weddings: The Social Construction of Beautiful Brides." *Interpreting Weight. The Social Management of Fatness and Thinness*. Ed. Jeffery Sobal and Donna Maurer. New York: de Gruyter, 1999. 113-138.

Sobchak, Vivian. "Revenge of *The Leech Woman*: On the Dread of Aging in a Low-Budget Horror Film." *The Horror Reader*. Ed. Ken Gelder. London: Routledge, 2000. 336-347.

Soloway, Jill. "Brenda's novel in progress." *Six Feet Under. Better Living Through Death*. Ed. Alan Ball and Alan Poul. With contrib. by Alan Ball, Scott Buck, Cara DiPaolo, Gabe Hudson, Joanna Lovinger, Nancy Oliver, Jill Soloway and Craig Wright. New York: Melcher, 2003. 156-161.

Suchsland, Inge. *Julia Kristeva zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius, 1992.

Tatum, Karen E. *Explaining the Depiction of Violence against Women in Victorian Literature: Applying Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection to Dickens, Brontë, and Braddon*. Lewiston: Mellen, 2005.

"Tent." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1989. Online version January 2012.

Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. "Introduction: From Wonder to Error – A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity." *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. Ed. Rosemary Garland Thomson. New York: New York UP, 1996. 1-22.

Turnock, Rob. "Death, liminality and transformation in *Six Feet Under*." *Reading Six Feet Under. TV To Die For*. Ed. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe. London: Tauris, 2005. 39-49.

Tyler, Imogen. "Against abjection." *Feminist Theory* 10 (2009): 77-98.

White, Michele. "Dirty Brides and Internet Settings: The Affective Pleasures and Troubles with Trash the Dress Photography Sessions." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110.3 (2011): 645-672.

White, Michele. "The Dirt on "Trash the Dress" Resistance: Photographers, Brides and the Mess of Post-wedding Imaging Sessions." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28 (2011): 1-19.

Wilson, Janet. "The Abject and Sublime: Enabling Conditions of New Zealand's Postcolonial Identity." *Postcolonial Cultures and Literatures. Modernity and the (Un)Commonwealth*. American University Studies 61. Ed. Andrew Benjamin, Tony Davies and Robbie B. H. Goh. New York: Peter Lang 2002: 300-319.

Wisker, Gina. "Dangerous Borders: Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca: Shaking the foundations of the romance of privilege, partying and place." *Journal of Gender Studies* 12 (2003): 83-97.

Wisker, Gina. "Don't Look Now! The compulsions and revelations in Daphne du Maurier's horror writing." *Journal of Gender Studies* 8 (1999): 19-33.

Wright, Craig. "Brenda's childhood poetry." *Six Feet Under. Better Living Through Death*. Ed. Alan Ball and Alan Poul. With contrib. by Alan Ball, Scott Buck, Cara DiPaolo, Gabe Hudson, Joanna Lovinger, Nancy Oliver, Jill Soloway and Craig Wright. New York: Melcher, 2003. 56-57.

Wright, Craig. "Excerpts from *Charlotte Light and Dark*." *Six Feet Under. Better Living Through Death*. Ed. Alan Ball and Alan Poul. With contrib. by Alan Ball, Scott Buck, Cara DiPaolo, Gabe Hudson, Joanna Lovinger, Nancy Oliver, Jill Soloway and Craig Wright. New York: Melcher, 2003. 60-65.

Yale Film Studies. Film Analysis Web Site 2.0. 2002. Film Studies Program, Yale U. 1 February 2012 < <http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis>>

Young, Elizabeth. "Here Comes the Bride: Wedding gender and race in *Bride of Frankenstein*." *Feminist Studies* 17.3 (1991): 403-438.

Zhanial, Susanne. "Monsters on the margin. The abject in literature." Diploma thesis. U of Vienna, 2008.

Not available

Bell, Quentin. *On Human Finery*. London: Hogarth Press, 1976.

Bride's Counsel in *Bride* July/August 1995.

Kristeva, Julia. "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini." *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Ed. Leon S. Roudiez and Alice Jardine. Trans. Thomas Gora. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993. 237-270.

9.2. Filmography

Six Feet Under. A Coat of White Primer. Season 5: Episode 1. Screenplay by Kate Robin. Dir. Rodrigo Garcia. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2006.

Six Feet Under. An Open Book. Season 1: Episode 5. Screenplay by Alan Ball. Dir. Kathy Bates. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2002.

Six Feet Under. Driving Mr Mossback. Season 2: Episode 4. Screenplay by Rick Cleveland. Dir. Michael Cuesta. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2006.

Six Feet Under. Eat a Peach. Season 5: Episode 5. Screenplay by Rick Cleveland. Dir. Daniel Minahan. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2006.

Six Feet Under. Falling Into Place. Season 4: Episode 1. Screenplay by Craig Wright. Dir. Michael Cuesta. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2005.

Six Feet Under. I'll Take You. Season 2: Episode 12. Screenplay by Jill Soloway. Dir. Michael Engler. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2004.

Six Feet Under. In Case of Rapture. Season 4: Episode 2. Screenplay by Rick Cleveland. Dir. Daniel Attias. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2005.

Six Feet Under. In Place of Anger. Season 2: Episode 6. Screenplay by Christian Taylor. Dir. Michael Engler. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2004.

Six Feet Under. Making Love Work. Season 3: Episode 6. Screenplay by Jill Soloway. Dir. Kathy Bates. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2005.

Six Feet Under. Pilot. Season 1: Episode 1. Screenplay by Alan Ball. Dir. Alan Ball. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2002.

Six Feet Under. Someone Else's Eyes. Season 2: Episode 9. Screenplay by Alan Ball. Dir. Michael Cuesta. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2004.

Six Feet Under. Static. Season 5: Episode 11. Screenplay by Craig Wright. Dir. Michael Cuesta. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2006.

Six Feet Under. Terror Starts At Home. Season 4: Episode 6. Screenplay by Kate Robin. Dir. Miguel Arteta. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2005.

Six Feet Under. The Bomb Shelter. Season 4: Episode 11. Screenplay by Scott Buck. Dir. Nicole Holofcener. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2005.

Six Feet Under. The Invisible Woman. Season 2: Episode 5. Screenplay by Bruce Eric Kaplan. Dir. Jeremy Podeswa. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2004.

Six Feet Under. The Last Time. Season 2: Episode 13. Screenplay by Kate Robin. Dir. Alan Ball. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2004.

Six Feet Under. The Secret. Season 2: Episode 10. Screenplay by Bruce Eric Kaplan. Dir. Alan Poul. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2004.

Six Feet Under. Untitled. Season 4: Episode 12. Screenplay by Nancy Oliver. Dir. Alan Ball. DVD. HBO Entertainment, 2005.

9.3. Figures

I have tried my best to credit all copyright owners of the images used in this study. Please contact me in case of any copyright infringement.

Ich habe mich bemüht, sämtliche Inhaber der Bildrechte ausfindig zu machen und ihre Zustimmung zur Verwendung der Bilder in dieser Arbeit eingeholt. Sollte dennoch eine Urheberrechtsverletzung bekannt werden, ersuche ich um Meldung bei mir.

Fig. 1: Waiting. Extract from Anderson, Heather D. S.. "Artist's Statement." *Frontiers* 27 (2006): 106-107.

Fig. 2: The bride's true, monstrous nature. Smirnoff Russian Wedding TV commercial, online on: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRuVr9l4pSg>, last accessed 26 February 2012. (00:00:14)

Screenshots from *Six Feet Under* (all rights reserved)

Fig. 3: "Let's do this thing!". *A Coat of White Primer* (title 0 ch 1 frame 11269)

Fig. 4: Brenda's bloody hand. *A Coat of White Primer* (title 0 ch 3 frame 37748)

Fig. 5: Lisa's covered up pregnancy. *Someone Else's Eyes* ((title 0 ch 4 frame 46906)

Fig. 6: Ruth gets to know her granddaughter in a cosy and clean environment. *I'll Take You* (title 0 ch 6 frame 81700)

Fig. 7: Brenda's water is breaking in the middle of the Fishers' kitchen. *Static* (title 2 ch 6 frame 69340) and (title 2 ch 6 frame 69684)

Fig. 8: Nate's attention is stirred up by Henry's abject body. *A Coat of White Primer* (title 0 ch 4 frame 51787)

Fig. 9: Lisa's abject corpse. *Falling Into Place* (title 0 ch 3 frame 32417)

Fig. 10: Brenda's "big granny panties". *A Coat of White Primer* (title 0 ch 5 frame 52007)

Fig. 11: Margaret's excessive body. *Untitled* (title 1 ch 5 frame 64273)

Fig. 12: Brenda as little girl. *A Coat of White Primer* (title 0 ch 5 frame 54043)

Fig. 13: George violating the cultural imperative of cleanliness, Ruth reaching out to Claire. *A Coat of White Primer* (title 0 ch 6 frame 62669) and (title 0 ch 6 frame 62744)

Fig. 14: Brenda retreats to a quiet, yet not peaceful place. *A Coat of White Primer* (title 0 ch 6 frame 66503)

Fig. 15: The emergence of Lisa's ghost. *A Coat of White Primer* (title 0 ch 6 frame 66988)

Fig. 16: Lisa as Ophelia. *A Coat of White Primer* (title 0 ch 6 frame 69401)

Fig. 17: Brenda as Mother Earth. *A Coat of White Primer* (title 0 ch 6 frame 69838)

Fig. 18: Brenda's violated skin. *A Coat of White Primer* (title 0 ch 4 frame 39838)

10. Appendix

Abstract

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit diskutiert Konstruktionen und Repräsentationen des Frauentypus ‚*mad bride*‘ (wahnsinnige, verrückte Braut) auf theoretischer und praktischer Ebene, und versucht dabei, naturalisierte Kategorien von Identität, Schönheit und Handlungsmöglichkeiten der Braut innerhalb des patriarchalen Diskursapparates aufzubrechen und neu zu konfigurieren. Um dieses Vorhaben in einen größeren akademischen Rahmen setzen zu können, wird vorerst das Konzept Identität auf allgemeiner sowie spezifischer Ebene, und schließlich anhand Julia Kristevas Theorie des Abjekts vorgestellt. Da die Parameter ‚*mad*‘ und ‚*bride*‘ mit Ambiguitäten und Inkohärenzen befrachtet sind, wird eine Arbeitsdefinition von *mad bride* eigens für die Verhandlung dieser Frauenfigur als gerechtfertigt und notwendig erachtet.

Wie in Kapitel 1 dargestellt, wird (bräutliche) Identität im allgemeinen Verständnis als einzigartig, stabil und transzendent beschrieben. Durch diese rigide Stabilität können sich auch Diskurse rund um Handlungsfreiheit und Schönheitsideale der Braut systematisch festsetzen und als vermeintlich essentielle Konstante fungieren. Neben dekonstruktivistischen Lesarten wird vor allem Kristevas Theorie des Abjekts als sinnvolles Instrument verstanden, Identität als krisenbeladen und brüchig zu problematisieren. Durch die ständige Konfrontation mit dem Abjekt, welchem eine inhärente Ambiguität zu Grunde liegt (es ist weder Subjekt, noch Objekt), drohen jene Grenzen, die das Subjekt zur eigenen Aufrechterhaltung gegen die Außenwelt zu ziehen sucht, immer wieder aufs Neue mit Selbstaflösung. Kristevas Theorie ermöglicht es außerdem, natürliche körperliche Prozesse, wie Ausscheidungen und Verfall, in ein produktives Spannungsfeld mit kulturell geprägten Erwartungen in Bezug auf den (weiblichen, bräutlichen) Körper zu bringen.

In Kapitel 2 wird kurz skizziert, wie durch die ständige Einschreibung eines hegemonialen Brautdiskurses innerhalb verschiedener Wissenssysteme Normen für diese weibliche Rolle in westlichen Gesellschaften konstituiert werden. Dabei wird der Braut ein schmales Terrain, gezeichnet von stark standardisierten, reglementierten, nahezu tableauxhaften Artikulationsmustern, zugeschrieben. Innerhalb dieses Raumes soll sie einerseits durch spektakuläres Aussehen wohlwollende Blicke auf sich ziehen, darf andererseits aber nicht als unkontrollierbar spektakulär auffallen. Die romantisierte Rolle der

Braut verfestigt also die Implikation, dass Weiblichkeit untrennbar mit dem Schönen, einer vergleichsweise einengenden, statischen Kategorie, verbunden ist.

In einer Analyse von Widersprüchen und Lücken der ideologisch besetzten Begriffe ‚bride‘ und ‚mad‘ indizieren Kapitel 3 und 4 schließlich die Kontingenz dieser augenscheinlich stabilen, natürlichen Gefüge. Dabei stehen der Verweis auf Prozesshaftigkeit und fließende Grenzen sowie auf, teilweise durchaus kalkulierte, Konstruktion und Stilisierung der jeweiligen Artikulationen im Vordergrund. Prozesse der Normalisierung und Naturalisierung dieser Kategorien werden im Zuge dessen als einer kritischen Kulturanalyse nicht standhaft aufgezeigt. Auch spüren diese Kapitel dem stereotypen, stark visuell geprägten Narrativ der verrückten, irren Braut nach. In dieser Tradition holt die Braut zu einem Befreiungsschlag gegen oben skizzierte Zuschreibungen aus, der sich etwa in einem sublim affektiven, blutbespritzten Brautkleid manifestieren kann.

Das Modell der *mad bride* versucht schließlich in Kapitel 5 eine geeignete theoretische Grundlage für weitere Analysen dieses Konstrukts von partikularistischer Femininität zu generieren. Die kulturtheoretische Definition von *mad bride*, die dabei entwickelt wird, geht von semantischen Überdefinitionen aus, welche spezifische Arten von Exzess implizieren. Im Besonderen nimmt diese Brautfigur eine paradoxe Subjektposition ein, die mithilfe binärer Dichotomien (A/B) aufgeschlüsselt werden kann. Während die humanistische Konzeption von Identität auf der Prämisse der Exklusivität beruht (eine Definition von ‚A‘ ergibt sich aus dem, was ‚A‘ nicht ist), inkludiert die *mad bride* sowohl die Markierung ‚A‘, als auch ‚B‘ in ihrer Identität und ihrem Körper. Die Haupthypothese dieser Arbeit ist, dass sich diese exzessive, paradoxe Position materialisieren muss. Daraus ergibt sich ein Forschungsinteresse für Materialisierungsprozesse, die innerhalb Kristevas Rahmens des Abjekts gelesen werden.

Durchaus als Ausbruchstheorie und Forum für deviante Strategien der Selbstbestimmung gedacht, wird das Modell der *mad bride* schließlich an einem konkreten Beispiel, der *Six Feet Under*-Episode ‚A Coat of White Primer‘, angewandt. Die darin auftretende Braut Brenda Chenowith verletzt die standardisierten Grenzen von Körper und Identität indem sie, gemäß einer *mad bride*, auf beiden Ebenen scheinbar natürlich Getrenntes auf abjekte Weise zusammenrückt und entsprechende Grenzen verrückt. Schließlich wird der Diskurs ‚*mad bride*‘ in ‚A Coat of White Primer‘ als begrüßenswerte Alternative zu strahlender Sauberkeit und reinweißer Schönheit, die im hegemonial bestimmten Wirkungsbild der Braut scheinbar untrennbar und exklusiv verbunden ist, vorgeschlagen.

Curriculum Vitae

Persönliche Daten

Name: Anna-Christina Leitner

Geburtsdatum: 7. April 1988

Geburtsort: Mistelbach, Niederösterreich

Staatsbürgerschaft: Österreich

Ausbildung

1994-1998 Volksschule Neudorf

1998-2006 BG/BRG Laa an der Thaya

Mai 2006 Matura mit ausgezeichnetem Erfolg

Seit 2006 Studium der Anglistik und Amerikanistik, gewähltes Fach Deutsche Philologie

Berufliche Tätigkeiten

Seit 2007 Nachhilfe in den Fächern Englisch und Deutsch

Seit 2010 Korrektorat und Lektorat (Niederösterreichische Nachrichten – Unabhängige Wochenzeitung für Niederösterreich, Sportausgabe Gänserndorf und Mistelbach)

Ehrenamtliche Tätigkeiten

Ferien- und Lernbetreuerin (Kinderfreunde)