



Drowning Self

Staging the Charm of the Strange, the Power of the Different, the Beauty of Death

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ABSTRACT

In (amateur) model photography, it is very popular to stage women close to or in water. This motif refers to aquatic creatures that can be distinguished into various categories: the gentle Meerjungfrau and the dangerous Nixe (both translate mermaid), as well as the iconic “Ophelia” who is also associated with an aesthetic way of dying. This article, based on long-term participant observation and qualitative interviews, is not only about the reasons why people are fascinated by such beings, but why they want to embody them. All these figures are captivating through their beauty, but also include ambiguity. The research shows that being a mermaid or Ophelia can enable the person to articulate inner conflicts by visualizing them and acting them out. Further, it helps to overcome one’s own body by taking the often challenging effort to impersonate these characters, thus to become something different. The physical effort to pose in the water adds to this effect that was described by (hobby) models as “healing”.

Introduction

Women, sitting on a rock with scaly fishtails by the seaside or peacefully sinking into a dark, romantic pond, long gowns floating on the water - this sounds like a picture taken from a fairytale and images like these enjoy great popularity within the scene of model photography in which mostly amateur models take pleasure in being staged for photographs. Why do people fancy staging images like these? Various reasons for the fascination for fairytales can be assumed, among them the way fairytales give moral teachings, fit into simple thought patterns of good and evil (especially Disney’s versions, see Hastings 1993:84f.), satisfy the wish for a just world, enable catharsis and the feeling of nostalgia „nurtured by a presence that is in deficit” (Fischer 1984:217). Similarly, icons, understood different from the semiotical usage of the term as something “quintessential and exemplary” (Holt 2004:231) fascinate due to the condensation they offer and, as the etymology suggests, it is often a visual condensation that is recognized and repeated.

The historical and cultural relevance of water, as well as its omnipresence, might explain, why water has always been inspiring. Especially, the connection between water and women is very present in mythology, fairytales, literature, and painting. “Whether it is murmuring, whispering, splashing or tossing, the sound of the water stands for the voice of nature”¹ (Stuby 1992:5)—it is the voice of the imagined “Mother Earth”, nurturing, caring, but also rough and difficult to tame—an ambivalence that may make it even more intriguing. However, there are three rather different water-related females

1 1 “Ob es murmelt, raunt, plätschert oder tost: Die Stimme des Wassers verkörpert den Urlaut der Natur.”

that mainly serve as an inspiration for photo shoots and that will be analysed in the following.

Research methods

This article is based on several years of participant observation within the scene of model photography, a scene that comprises several 100 000 members alone in the German-speaking areas². It includes hobbyists and (semi)professionals alike, with a focus on the hobbyists. Photo shoots are often done as *tfp*= “time for pictures” which means that neither the models nor the photographers get paid but that both can use the resulting pictures for their portfolios. Thus, there is usually a high intrinsic motivation to engage in photo shoots. The roles are not fixed - some models “switch sides” and become photographers or practice photography parallel to modelling, some photographers occasionally go in front of the lens, sometimes as an ironical reflection. However, more than 90% of the models are female and there are slightly more male than female photographers. The scene connects via specific online platforms and Facebook groups, as well as real-life meetings in photo clubs or at events.

Participant observation implies taking part in the scene—in my case as a photographer—which can make it difficult to achieve the right balance between participation and the emic view on the one hand and distance and thus a more objective, external view on the other hand (see Lapassade 2007, 50, see Grutzpalk 2003, 15): viewing rather from the outside leads to observation (instead of participant observation), a too pronounced inner view makes the researcher’s perspective more difficult and possibly also impedes the cultural mediation.

Therefore, 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews in informal settings were conducted to add to the data from the participant observation and to gain more insights about opinions, values, and subjective meanings of the interviewees (see Reinders 2016:81). The strategy to combine various methods should be a “path of knowledge and extension of approaches in the collection and analysis of data” (Flick 2010:285, see also Jerrentrup 2018:25ff.). More than 90% of the models stated that being staged as a mermaid or as Ophelia would be among their favourite topics and that they had either done so already and would like to repeat it, or that it was on their to-do list.

Mermaid

The mermaid—half-woman, half-fish—is probably among the most famous hybrid creatures (for the history of anthropomorphism see Naumov 2013), the most iconic figure connected to water used e.g. by the coffee brand Starbucks, prominent in “animation films, toys and even [in] electronic-computer games some kind of ‘mermaidization’ syndrome is developed” (Akgün Comak and Pembecioglu 2018:156f.).

Also for the models, the mermaid is among the favourite figures to embody. Even though there are mythological male figures that are human-fish hybrids, e.g. Poseidon’s son Triton or Matsya, an avatar of Lord Vishnu, it is hard to find any calls for photo shoots set up by male models or photographers looking for male models to embody a merman—obviously, the species is imagined to be feminine.

The mermaid is a creature that hardly fits into categories—not fish, not human—and that carries traits of asexuality on the one hand, as she seemingly does not have any sexual organs, and on the

² The forum “Model-kartei.de” counts more than 300 000 members, the groups on Facebook around 30 000- 40 000 members (e.g. Modelnest, Modelbox, Alternative Modelkartei).

other hand, is imagined to be a very erotic creature. She was also interpreted as similar to intersexual people: “Cultural representations of intersex subjects and mermaids have in common, throughout history, a profound anxiety of the unknown, the other-than-human, the transgressive, of that which resists bodily, speciesist and/or gendered unity by exceeding boundaries of the body and identity” (Amato 2016:192).

When it comes to the term “mermaid”, the German language offers an interesting distinction that I will use in the following: There are *Meerjungfrauen*, mermaids which literally can be translated as “virgins of the sea”, and “Nixen”, which etymologically are traced back to the Latin term “necare” that means “to kill”. Thus, there is a fundamental difference between *Meerjungfrauen* and *Nixen*, even though they are portrayed very similar or even indistinguishable, as beautiful women usually without legs and feet but with a fishtail.

Meerjungfrauen

The *Meerjungfrauen* is deeply associated with Hans Christian Andersen’s fairytale that has no direct predecessor in folklore (see Mussies 2016:2) and later Walt Disney’s adaptation. In Andersen’s tale, the Little Mermaid “is driven to the surface world by two complementary but separable impulses: a romantic/erotic desire for the handsome prince whom she rescues from drowning in a shipwreck and a moral desire, privileged in Andersen’s telling, to attain a soul with the promise of an afterlife” (Hastings 1993:85). A sea hag turns her into a human in exchange for her enchanting voice. The agreement further states that she must win the love of the prince and marry him in order to obtain a soul, otherwise she would die by the dawn of the first day after his marriage without the chance to ever get a soul. The Little Mermaid’s romantic desire gets frustrated as the prince marries another girl. However, she rejects the opportunity to kill the prince in order to save herself. But when the deadly sun rises, the Little Mermaid gets a second chance at immortality and becomes an ethereal spirit: “Even though the romantic/erotic narrative is frustrated, the ‘higher’ narrative of moral progress remains a possibility” (Hastings 1993:85, for Andersen’s personal motivations see Mussies 2016:2). In the Disney movie, first released in 1989 and about to be remade, the Little Mermaid Ariel is also willing to sacrifice for true love, but the romantic fulfilment and the happy-ending are stressed. Everything evil is encapsulated in the sea witch Ursula, another hybrid character with the legs of an octopus and the upper body of a female, whereas the sea hag in Andersen’s story is a minor character appearing only once.

Looking at *Meerjungfrauen* such as the Little Mermaid, one is “split between envy and pity” (Barounis 2016:192). Just as Ariel, they are imagined as rather gentle and often weak creatures, matching a common observation: “The myth that tells us of the encounter between female creatures connected to the sea or to springs and male conquerors of the sea and builders of dams represents such an imagined world, [...] in categories of femininity and masculinity. In this fantasy, the feminine is imagined as the Aquatic, flowing, and the masculine as a force that restrains and channels”³ (Stuby 1992:9). Consequently, the *Meerjungfrauen* is pictured to have classical feminine features, representing beauty and grace but also weakness and powerlessness: Ariel for example “is silent and passive” (see Mussie 2016:6).

3 “Der Mythos, der uns von der Begegnung zwischen weiblichen Meeres- und Quellwesen und männlichen Meeresbezwingern und Dämmebauern erzählt, repräsentiert eine solche, [...] ausphantasierte, in Weiblichkeits- und Männlichkeitsbilder gekleidete Vorstellungswelt. Das Weibliche wird in ihr als das Aquatische, Fließende imaginiert und das Männliche als Kraft, die eindämmt und kanalisiert.”

One step further one can interpret that the woman (like the sea creature) stands for nature, and the man for culture. This opposition has a long tradition in our society: “In Western patriarchal culture, both women and nonhuman nature have been devalued alongside their assumed opposites—men and civilization/ culture” (Kemmerer 2011:15). However, it is obviously wrong to imagine that people, be they men or women, can overcome nature: “Man is a creature of nature, insofar as he is his (biological) body, and he is a creature of culture, insofar he (by socialisation), has his body” (Gugutzer 2015:15). Thus, men and women, and even *Meerjungfrauen* can be understood as creatures of both nature and culture. The nature/culture and “man/woman dualism is used as justification for exploitative attitudes and actions of men toward women” (Mickey 2018:xx). Indeed, this dualism might be currently changing. Ecofeminism dates back to the 1970s and raises “awareness about interconnections between women’s oppression and nature’s domination in the attempt to liberate women and nature from unjust subordinations” (Yang 2018:3). Nowadays, in the context of increased debates about the protection of the environment, these ideas experience new relevance. The *Meerjungfrauen* then embodies an interesting link between nature and culture, and harmonisation between both.

Meerjungfrauen are imagined as enchanted creatures, usually very beautiful and graceful but they also implicit represent a tragedy: they often want to be real women but are stuck in a category in between animal and human, water and land. They do not fit in. This is e.g. exemplified in the story of Ariel who wants nothing more than to be a real woman. Here two different, tragic aspects in the *Meerjungfrau’s* status of “being in-between” can be detected: in the first place, *Meerjungfrauen* would not have a place in human society—thus the tragedy lies in the discrimination, in the behaviour of others towards them. Being different means being suspicious. Countless experiments have proven a preference for in-groups, especially famously shown in Henri Tajfel and John Turner’s study about the minimal group paradigm (see Tajfel and Turner 1986). Creatures in-between human and animal might be fascinating but form an ultimate out-group. As a second tragical aspect, they cannot be what they want to be—usually human— therefore are not content with their bodily existence.

As already mentioned, *Meerjungfrauen* are weak creatures. In Disney’s version, “Ariel does not have any power and ends up marrying a guy she barely knows [...] so she is just trading one form of patriarchy for another” (Mussie 2016:5f.). In order to get her voice, the sea witch Ursula says: “You will have your looks, your pretty face [...] The men up there don’t like a lot of blabber or babble”. Towbin and his colleagues interpret, that “to win the love of the prince, she must forfeit her thoughts and intellect, her independence and identity” (Towbin et al. 2008:38) and even the prince himself quickly adjusts to Ariel’s lack of voice. The famous story of the mermaid is “maledriven and privilege, power, oppression, and sexual intrusion are all present within the the fairy tale as well as the film. At the same time, there is a hidden layer of LGBTQ+ traces” (Mussies 2016:8), in Andersen’s motivation to write it—he had to cope with his unfulfilled love for another man—as well as in the text itself, and even in Disney’s depiction of Ursula that was inspired by a famous drag queen. Thus, the *Meerjungfrauen* can also be understood as a statement about gender relations.

Nixe

The *Nixen* might look just like *Meerjungfrauen*: they are also woman-like creatures of the sea. Even though they are also imagined as beautiful and graceful, they feature very different characteristics. “She spoke to him, she sang to him, His fate became quite plain, Half drawn by her he glided in And was not seen again”⁴ in Goethe’s ballad “The Fisherman” (1779) the creature seems to be beautiful and beguiling but at the same time dangerous, even deadly. Again we encounter an “unsettling hybrid

4 “Sie sprach zu ihm, sie sang zu ihm ... halb zog sie ihn, halb sank er hin und ward nicht mehr geseh’n”

between species” (Barounis 2016, 190): “As mythological sirens, mermaids (*Nixen*, the author) are understood to be premodern femme fatales whose feminine allure is fraught with heterosexual peril” (Barounis 2016: 190). Sirens, a specific type of female creatures of the sea, are known from Homer’s *Odyssey*. The resourceful Ulysses wants to listen to the amazing and mesmerizing chants of these creatures but knows that they intend to knock him off course in order to kill him. So he tells his crew to plug their ears while he binds himself to the mast to enjoy the wonderful but dangerous sounds. Thus, combining the two poles of beauty and danger, sirens are understood as *Nixen*. Different from *Meerjungfrauen*, they are powerful, through their beauty (and eventually some magic) they exert power over men, and only Ulysses can trick them. It is not their physical strength, but their charisma, their charm which empowers them. Therefore, their strength only develops in the encounter with men, and, seen from another perspective, it is grounded in men’s weakness.

As such, *Nixen* are similar to *Meerjungfrauen*, but another aspect is stressed - here the powerful and even aggressive - there the tragic. In both cases, the fundamental opposition “male – female” is underlying the idea of the mermaid. (See Fig. 1)

Being a mermaid

When it comes to photography, it is the recipient who is imagined to surrender to the sea creature’s magic, her beauty and grace. Here the difference between *Meerjungfrauen* and *Nixe* vanishes: both share the power to fascinate and seduce, a power that is imagined to be ultimately feminine. Besides the fascination they exert, all kinds of mermaids share the uncanny. The “uncanny valley” is described as the relationship between the degree of resemblance of an object or a creature to a human and the emotional response of the recipient. Whereas people tend to like objects having human-like features, objects or creatures which can be identified as very close to humans but still not really human such as corpses, human-like robots etc. often cause unpleasant emotions. There are various explanations of this phenomenon (e.g. see MacDorman and Entezari 2015), among them the fear of the unknown and the threat toward well-established patterns of thinking. Being half-fish and half-human, the mermaid might be close to the uncanny valley, which can be used well in art, as it evokes stronger and more ambivalent feelings than just a beautiful woman. Being staged as a mermaid thus makes the model act out the feeling of “not fitting in” (see Mussie 2016, 8) and being rejected which refers “to the innocent girl having no voice heard by the others, expecting to be accepted” (Akgün Comak and Pembecioglu 2018, 164).

The combination of the beautiful upper part of the mermaid with a fishtail—something that, regarded on its own, is usually seen as rather unpleasant or even disgusting—to form an enchanting entity, can stand for an embrace of the own oddities and weaknesses. As a whole, the person can still be beautiful and maybe even due to her weaknesses special, enchanting, and powerful.

Further, there is the wish for a different body, as *Meerjungfrauen* are often driven by the wish to have legs instead of the fishtail. Therefore, many women, who wish that their body were different, can identify with mermaids and express their sorrows by playing a mermaid—an aspect that was mentioned by nearly every model that has already been staged as or would like to be staged as a mermaid. At the same time, the lack of control over the own body is overcome in the photo shot with the help of props, make-up, costume, posing, and retouching. Another aspect, connected to the already mentioned dissatisfaction with the own body, is the lack of sexuality due to the fishtail, which leaves room for psychoanalytic readings of the *Meerjungfrauen* as a creature that stands for unsatisfied wishes.

An argument that is similar to the wish to have a different body but that even exceeds it is the wish for a different type of existence. This is a more comprehensive aspect: the mermaid not only wishes to have legs but also to change her entire being, her surroundings, her life, her species. Some women who are uncomfortable in their role in society, their stage of life, or their existence can articulate this by staging themselves as mermaids. Sell interprets Ariel as striving for upward mobility trying to belong to a “better” social group, the group of humans (see Sell 1995). Thus, either one’s own physical issues or questions about one’s role in society were addressed by every interviewee who was interested in being staged as a mermaid. This aspect is supported in the original version of Andersen’s story, in which the mermaid “remains something non-human, representing something very human” (Mussie 2016:3) which can be interpreted in the context of homosexuality, or, more general, the repression of certain groups or people by society: “The hidden message is that it’s wrong for a mermaid to fall in love with a prince” (Mussie 2016:3), thus, a conservative message that prevents the overstepping of boundaries. This message can be questioned if a human being personifies a mermaid and consequently proves that it is possible to cross such boundaries.

Another aspect lies in the power that female creatures of the sea exert. It is different from that of a warrior queen as it has a more psychological touch to it, it is the power over people’s, especially men’s minds and emotions. This kind of power appears not only more elegant and subtle but eventually also matches the real-life experiences of the women themselves much better.

Even though both types of mermaids are associated with beguiling beauty and ultimate femininity, they lack the organs for “real” sexuality and therefore might limit the recipient’s phantasy. As such, the German term *Meerjungfrauen*, literally translated as “virgin of the sea” makes sense: she must be and remain a virgin. Therefore, embodying a mermaid could also be seen as a critical approach to one’s own sexuality.

Body-transcendence in Christian terms was seen in Andersen’s version of the Little Mermaid, that can be interpreted in terms of “humility and redemption” (Zipes 2013:133): “Trust in God’s design, and you will fare well, even if you should die” (Zipes 2013:133). The mermaid has to sacrifice her worldly body in order to gain a place in the heavens. Model photography offers a parallel, as it uses the body to actually transcend it: being staged and eventually not even recognizable any more, the model becomes rather an idea, a concept, or a symbol than just another version of herself (see Jerrentrup 2018:119).

Ophelia

Another prototypical figure connected to water and also another popular photographic topic is called “Ophelia” within the scene of staged photography.

Looking at Shakespeare’s play, Ophelia inspired countless works of arts, literature, theatre plays, paintings, and movies (see Pererson and Williams 2012:1f.) and also countless interpretations. Ophelia’s appearance seems to be of special importance: “Ophelia is not coached in what to say to Hamlet. Rather, she is supposed to communicate an impression by her visual appearance alone” (Gellert Lyons 1977:60) states Gellert Lyons with regard to Ophelia’s meeting with Hamlet arranged by Polonius in the third act of the play. The focus on her visual appearance sounds superficial, thus, it becomes particularly ironic that her death will be “in-depth” as she will be drowning.

Gellert Lyons continues looking at the association that Ophelia’s appearance evokes and states,

that it is “reminiscent of countless representation of the Virgin” (Gellert Lyons 1977:61). Obviously, Shakespeare plays with iconography, linking Ophelia to Mary as well as to the mythical, pastoral Flora. But also Ophelia herself became an icon, e.g. standing for the beauty of death.

Of course, there are far more messages that can be found in Shakespeare’s Ophelia. “To view the deaths of the tragic females as victimizations by patriarchy—and no more than that—is to ignore the commentary that Shakespeare’s texts make upon masculine impulses of possession, politics, and power” (Gajowski 1992:22). However, going deeper into the rich literature on Shakespeare’s figure seems unnecessary considering that most model and photographers staging “Ophelia” might be roughly aware of Shakespeare’s story but most probably do not get any further.

Besides, more sources may have inspired the staging of a beautiful drowning or drowned girl: “The aestheticization of death in water has a long cultural-historical tradition, as does the aestheticization of drowning—and it is predominantly embodied by females”⁵ (Fenske 2012:230). Among the sources that made the death in water popular in Western art and imagination is the story of an unknown corpse in the year 1900 that added to its popularity. The death mask of this young woman was displayed to the public in Paris in order to find out more about her identity. What made her famous was her beautiful and somehow content looking face, an aura of mysteriousness surrounding her. Soon, there were numerous reproductions of her mask, decorating private living rooms up to today (see Fenske 2012:232).

Even Nazi propaganda used death in the water. In their movies, it was mainly the actress Kristina Söderbaum, who played the self-abandoning woman. The Nazis glorified such self-abandonment and death, and the women portrayed by Söderbaum had to suffer loss, deprivation, and violence (see Fenske 2012:233). The dying woman stood for the life and death in the service of her nation and thus, was morally lifted up.

The woman dying in water thus can be a sign for self-abandonment, be it as resignation, as social statement, due to victimization, or as a sign of ultimate capacity for suffering.

In a more psychoanalyst point of view „the configuration of the dead lover stands for the paradox desires for a carefree approach to the female and at the same time for the desire for its elimination”⁶ (Stuby 1992, 14). The corpse is not deformed as it happens in many other ways of dying but still looks very human and very beautiful. However, she cannot act anymore and therefore becomes a perfect object for (male) desire. Interpreted from this point of view, Ophelia is part of sexual phantasies playing with dominance and submissiveness. In this line of thought, her sex plays an important role, and the death in the water anyway is a kind of dying that carries feminine connotations, proven also by statistics about real suicides in water (see Fenske 2012:230).

Another interpretation looks at the ambivalence of death: “On the ‘beautiful corpse’, the fear of death and the desire for death can be transferred”⁷ (Fenske 2012:232). Making the unthinkable look beautiful, its aestheticisation, puts worldly categories on the non-worldly, describing it with words

5 “Die Ästhetisierung des Todes im Wasser hat eine lange kulturhistorische Tradition, genauso wie die Ästhetisierung der Wasserleiche – und sie bezieht sich ganz überwiegend auf Frauen”

6 “in der Konfiguration der toten Geliebten [...] der paradoxe Wunsch nach gefahrloser Annäherung an das Weibliche und der Wunsch nach seiner Eliminierung”

7 “Auf die ‚schöne Leiche‘ kann die Angst vor dem Tod sowie der Wunsch nach dem Tod übertragen werden”

like “dainty”, “graceful”, or “romantic”, which might make it even seem worthwhile. Ophelia’s death is imagined as tragic but also peaceful (see Fenske 2012:230). The dying woman is in the water, thus is back to nature where she came from, and the circle of life can begin again as a huge *Panta Rhei*.

Contra to this interpretation of a harmonic death close to nature, Ophelia can also be understood as the pinnacle of decadence, as reflected in Heiner Müllers *Hamletmaschine*: “In an aestheticizing perspective, death is detached from its factuality, transformed into a literary motif, and as such gains new formal quality. It is not the death of the dead woman that matters, but the extent to which she approaches the Ophelia depiction of John Everett Millai. It does not seem important that she is dying, and what consequences this may have for the dying and her husband, but the formal and aesthetic qualities of dying”⁸ (Bolterauer o. J.). It is only the surface, the façade, resulting in an extreme superficiality which has lost any other value. Ophelia as peacefully going back to nature on the one hand and being the embodiment of superficiality on the other hand - these two very different readings of Ophelia as a symbol of the aesthetic death point towards the ambivalence that constructs the entire figure: she is part of two worlds. “Moving between life and death, reason and insanity, eroticism and decadence, forced to sanctity by her male relatives and condemned by Hamlet as a whore, Ophelia is anything but stable in her identity and portrayal”⁹ (Ochsner 2014:458). This seems to be a parallel to many models, who are trying to find or fix their identities.

Being Ophelia

Under the label “*Ophelia*” that is obviously taken from Shakespeare’s play, women in model photography are portrayed in or close to water. They pose in a beautiful, feminine but passive way that evokes the association of sleep or even death. Often, the women are shown wearing long dresses that float on the water. As already mentioned, the ambivalence surrounding Ophelia makes her a particularly interesting subject for art. Her picture exists in the collective unconscious, yet she can be shown in various ways, placing emphasis on one or the other part.

For the models, her story offers a chance for identification: “The story of Ophelia [...] shows the destructive forces that affect young women. As a girl, Ophelia is happy and free, but with adolescence she loses herself [...]. She has no inner direction [...]. Her value is determined utterly by male approval” (Pipher and Pipher Gilliam 2019:4). Thus, the conflicts that surround Ophelia are quite typical and well-known to many models—a fact, that was confirmed in most interviews.

The self-designation “*Ophelia*” is also used by girls “who identify with the fictional character [...], when trying to justify their self-destructive impulses toward anorexia, bulimia, and physical self-punishment” (Perni 2016:503, for a personal account, see Harrison 2015). In this context, Ophelia is perceived as fragile, but—from the perspective of the girls concerned—also as self-determined: she creates her body and her life in a way she wants to, even if it would be her wish to destroy herself.

8 “In ästhetisierender Perspektive wird der Tod aus seiner Faktizität losgelöst, er transformiert sich in ein literarisches Motiv und gewinnt als solches neue formale Qualität. Nicht die tote Frau als gestorbene scheint von Belang, sondern die Frage, inwieweit sie sich der Ophelia-Darstellung des John Everett Millais annähert. Nicht daß gestorben wird und welche Konsequenzen dies für die Sterbende und ihren Mann haben kann, erscheint wichtig, sondern die Frage nach den formal-ästhetischen Qualitäten des Sterbens

9 “Sich zwischen Leben und Tod, Vernunft und Wahnsinn, Erotik und Dekadenz bewegend, von ihren männlichen Verwandten zur Heiligkeit gezwungen und von Hamlet als Hure verdammt, ist Ophelia sowohl in ihrer Identität als auch in ihrer Darstellung alles andere als stabil”

Further, the countless interpretations of Ophelia seem to embody the search for identity: her picture creates attention, as it is recognizable, yet offers a blank paper that can be filled by the photography team, by their ideas and interpretations: “It leaves room for creativity”, as one of the interviewees put it.

Following the psychoanalyst reading, devote fantasies might be playing a role, but often in a rather abstract way, the idea of surrendering in general or surrendering to death. It can mean a preoccupation with death, the wish to give it a try and to demystify it. Here, the connectedness to nature might come into play, but also mere aestheticisation might help to handle the inevitable. Staging Ophelia is a strong Memento Mori. Every photograph can be regarded as such and the relationship between the photograph and her photographed that has been described this way by many scholars (see e.g. Sontag 1973/2005, 11 and Blood and Cacciatore 2014), yet, Ophelia is a Memento mori in a much more obvious way. Thus, staging her serves the confrontation with death and through its aestheticization, some of its horrors might be lost. Embodying her resembles staging the own death and in a way overcoming it. The preoccupation with death was mentioned by every model who had already or wanted to model as Ophelia. (See Fig. 2 and Fig. 3)

Overcoming the body

There are more water-related creatures embodied in model photography such as nymphs who are known as minor goddesses in Greek mythology, the Celtic Melusine, and sea monsters such as Nessie. However, mermaids—*Meerjungfrauen* or *Nixen*—and Ophelias are the by far most popular in model photography which is obvious in interviews, in calls for shots both set up by models and photographers, and pictures presented on Facebook or Modelkartei.

Before a photo shot takes place, the model usually deals with the planned topic, thinks how she will embody the character, e.g. which dresses she could wear, which makeup would be appropriate, which postures suitable, and thus, builds up a projection screen in her mind.

The situation of the photo shot itself is often laced with anxiety: The photograph will keep the moment in a detailed and static way that can be disadvantageous, and anyway, it usually belongs - in the first place to the photographer, who thus gets a visual impression of the model that exceeds her self-perception by offering the chance to zoom in or to show angles the model cannot even see herself in front of the mirror (see Jerrentrup 2018:41f.). This situation cause a feeling of lack of control and requires a lot of trust. Further, both model and photographer have to communicate about the feelings to embody which often leads to an intimate conversation. Playing a role in a photo shot is often comparable to method acting, a strategy introduced by the Russian actor and film director Konstantin Stanislawski who taught his students to empathize with the role they intended to embody by finding the relevant emotions inside themselves (see Hänßler 2018). However, even if the model does not use this strategy but tries to understand the character she embodies through observation and research on it, magnetic resonance imaging shows that the same areas in the brain are activated by real emotions. A large body of research suggests that there are obvious effects on a person playing a character: “States of the body, such as postures, arm movements, and facial expressions, arise during social interaction and play central roles in social information processing”, and further, “bodily states in the self produce affective states” (Barsalou et al. 2003:43). More complex and long-term relationships between values, attitudes, behaviour, and embodiment may be difficult to prove, but at least it has to be noted that playing a role makes the model feel different, eventually gracious and mysterious, eventually evil and powerful, or close to death yet beautiful. It is possible, that playing a *Meerjungfrauen*—not content with her body yet enchanting and mysterious to others—can help to develop a more positive attitude

towards her own flaws, and that playing a *Nixe* can make the individual feel powerful even though she is aware of herself being eventually different from what is usually perceived as socially desired. Embodying *Ophelia* may help her to define her identity and to integrate the inevitable in her life. However, impersonating any of these creatures means to eventually overstep the boundaries of one's own body, to turn it into a symbol. The result is more than a beautiful picture, in which the model is still recognizable as an improved version of herself. In these pictures, she is not posing as herself but stands for something different, for one of her traits and her way of coping, or for a more general human condition.

The scenarios for photography can be implemented in different ways, among them, full photo montage is possible, but in most cases, the model will really get into the water, which can be physically and emotionally challenging. Usually, she wears long dresses that get heavy in the water or even a fishtail which impedes her movements; the location is often a pond or a lake, thus the water is cold and often full of seaweed and mud. The team might have to take a long walk carrying all the props in order to reach the location. In the case of underwater photography, modelling entail even an effort for a good swimmer. The dresses can be pulling her down, and the posing underwater with the eyes opened and a suitable face expression is quite difficult for many.

Becoming a mermaid or *Ophelia* thus means exploring the body's boundaries in many ways: overcoming fears, anxieties, and aversions, as well as overcoming reality's limitations by turning into a fantastic creature or, more in general, into a concept. As one model expressed it, this "can be a healing experience."

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Images



Fig. 1 - Mermaids are often depicted in a kitschy, dreamlike way. Model: Tanja. Bodypainting: Peter and Petra Tronser



Fig. 2 - As many Ophelia motifs, the model seems to be indulging and suffering at the same time. Model: Wing Sum Diana Chan.



Fi. 3 - The body underwater looks astonishingly light and gracious. Model: Ilka Kru