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The Lady with Horns

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The lady with horns or antlers is a particularly popular theme in model photography. For more than 10 years I have been participating in the scene of (amateur) model photography and have seen this trend emerge. However, it came as a bit of a surprise to me: while most themes draw inspirations from fairytales or singular motifs that are obviously deeply rooted in our culture, the horned lady is not so easy to explain. It had been popular before Disney's Maleficent came out in 2014 and even though there are people specifically embodying Maleficent, many motifs may not refer to her, showing different types of horns/antlers, styles, looks, etc.

Let us take a look at the way the models present themselves. The horns sometimes appear as a part of a crown or headdress. In most cases they seem attached to the head, to form a fantasy creature. In other cases, it is not identifiable whether the character has horns, or wears a headpiece with horns. Thus, the "lady with horns" is a hybrid category. Such creatures have forever lived in the imagination of people. However, there is something uncanny about them.

“...since the Renaissance, the most common cognate and eventual alternate for ugliness was ‘grotesque.’ The word derived from the Italian grottesche (itself from ‘grotto,’ cave), a term that designated the fantastic decorative designs discovered in 1480 on the walls of underground, grottolike vaults of ancient Roman temples, baths, and palaces. In the eyes of classicists, these otherwise pleasingly innocuous decorative hybrids of implausibly and ambiguously intertwined vegetal, animal, and human elements embodied the transgressive character of ugliness: they exemplified an ‘ars combinatoria’ or ‘species of confusion’ that flouted natural law, befuddled reason, and offended decorum. Hybrid confections resulting in monstrous, unnatural, indeed degenerate creations became one of the prime sites of ugliness”¹.

Hybrids can be admired, as they have certain powers humans do not have, and it is not surprising that many mythologies tell of gods and heroes who combine human and animal features. Some hybrids are imagined as enchantingly beautiful; mermaids, for example, exert power over humans (specifically men) by their beauty or, in the case of sirens, through their amazing voices. Yet, when I did a survey on Facebook in December 2019 asking which hybrid creature models like to embody, the lady with horns or antlers came first.

Research

The German scene of model photography numbers several hundred thousand members. I use the word “scene” instead of “subculture,” as I want to avoid the hierarchical order implied by the syllable “sub-”. Furthermore, “subculture” is often connected to Dick Hebdige’s definition that refers to “style as a form of refusal,”² whereas in the case of the model photography scene, the “refusal” does not have to be regarded as a very prominent aspect.

The scene connects via social media, mostly Facebook and Instagram, or more specific forums like Model-Kartei or Fotocommunity. There are offline activities such as meetings, photoshoots, workshops, and exhibitions but the planning of the events and presentation of the pictures mostly takes place online.

In my research, I rely on more than 10 years of participation and participant observation in the scene, numerous informal interviews and conversations, as well as on two identical surveys I conducted in two Facebook groups dedicated to modelling, which allowed me to reach a higher number of people. More than 100 models answered the surveys in which I asked what hybrid character they most like to embody. With around 58% (multiple answers were possible) horned creatures were in first place.

Considering the ethics of my research, part of my data collection could be characterized as covert observation, simply because it would not be possible to do the research while constantly mentioning that I am a participant observer. However, in the survey and in informal conversations, the models emphasized that they are very interested in my

research, and were all very willing to answer my questions. I therefore assume that the people concerned would generally agree with my conclusions.

Associations

With its very prominent position on the human body, horns seem to make a specific statement³. Horns are charged with a multitude of often conflicting meanings⁴, but following Russel, they “have a basically positive character. Commonly they signify fertility. Horns are identified with the crescent moon, which signifies fertility both in the basic idea of growth and through its association with menstruation. They are associated with the phallic serpent and with the mighty procreative power”⁵. This could also be reflected in the expression “wearing the horns” for cuckolded, whose origin is uncertain, but could be possibly interpreted as a double phallus symbolism [*Editor’s note- while the author does not mention it specifically, the common English slang term “horny,” meaning “sexually aroused” would also reflect this linguistic connection*].

In the following, I would like to give an overview of different associations with horns that can come into play in model photography. I came to these associations by looking at and categorizing the images based on my observations and conversations with models.

The Devil

Even though Russel sees horns as fundamentally positively connotated, they also stand for danger and for “the fundamental, mysterious, and frightening otherness of animals.”⁶ So it seems conclusive that the most frightening figure, the Devil, is traditionally represented as an extreme hybrid creature that, in addition to its horns, may also have hooves and a tail. This depiction of the Devil has lasted for centuries⁷ and was probably inspired by depictions of the Greek god Dionysus, matching the association of fertility and uncontrolled sexuality with the Dionysian cults. Consequently, the “devilish” is often presented as attractive and erotic.

This gives a hint to the Devil’s popularity: he is associated with unrestrained sexuality. Courage, coupled with megalomania, also make the devil an interesting character. This becomes particularly clear in his connection to the fallen angel Lucifer, translated “the bringer of light,” who is often equated with the Devil. Lucifer’s “fall had been associated with proud, unlawful insurrection against divine authority. Giving new meaning to this old theme, the Romantic Satanists transformed the fallen angel into a noble champion of [...] individual freedom.”⁸ This evil, personified by the horned devil, stands for the forbidden which fascinates, as it seems to offer more options to the individual. This is reflected in the notion that many people think Hell must be a more interesting place than Heaven.⁹ The morally good, the just, and the right are pictured as rather absolute, and (at first sight) offer less creativity and freedom of choice, which is the subject of theodicy.

But there is not only an individualistic aspect to the fascination for the Devil:

“From a political perspective [...] the nineteenth-century poets singing paeans to Satan were almost invariably ‘Leftist’ or ‘Radical’, combining a progressive belief in social and political reform with strongly anti-Christian or anticlerical attitudes. The devil, in the most important of their myths, became strongly associated with the emancipating and liberating tendencies of the Western Revolution”¹⁰.

Embodying the devil thus can have a political dimension as well, or at least the aura of an emancipating tendency.

However, it may be surprising that the lord of the darkness is usually imagined as masculine (just as the god of light¹¹), while the models are almost all female. Further, they hardly ever embody a typical devil with red horns, red skin, and an evil face.

Therefore, I assume that the Devil, especially some aspects of this figure, may well be an inspiration, but he himself is not usually connoted in the depictions.



A hybrid creature with horns, bones, and dreadlocks. The model's expression gives the picture a mystical touch. Model and Headdress: Marén Söhnlein Maskenzauber. Photographer: Pantalaimon Fotografie.

Gods

The Devil might have horns, but so do several gods. As already mentioned, the Christian depiction of the devil might have its roots in representations of the god Dionysus. Further, the Greeks and Romans had more horned gods and mythological figures "such as Pan and Faunus, but these were deities of the remote countryside, much less prominent in worship than other forms of divinity,"¹² which is explained by the fact that both cultural contexts were rather urban.

Let us take a look at several more gods that are (occasionally) depicted with horns. The Gods of ancient Mesopotamia took human form, and to distinguish between divine images and those of mortals, the gods were depicted as wearing horns- specifically mitres with horns¹³, which became a visual signifier of their godly power. In Hindu mythology, the god Shiva can take both the form of a lingam and a bull. The Celts had a god called Cernunnos, "generally depicted with two enormous hart antlers in his head"¹⁴.

One of the oldest incidents of horned hybrids, that might be associated with the godly, comes from the British Mesolithic. 21 skull frontlets of red deer with antlers attached were discovered in 1949 and 1951. They had been adapted to be worn on human heads. Grahame Clark, who led the excavations-

"...proposed that they had been the costume of priests or shamans: there is a famous seventeenth-century drawing of a Siberian shaman wearing just such a headdress. On the other hand, he admitted that they could also have been disguises used by hunters of the deer; and those two possibilities have been cited, without resolution, ever since."¹⁵

In early Britain, horned gods "could be simply symbols of strength and power; or of wild nature; or of a pastoral economy based on herds and flocks"¹⁶. With some weathered pictures from this time, it is not clear if they wear horns, horned helmets, or wings. Building on these traditions in Wicca and related forms of Neopaganism (a rapidly growing religious movement¹⁷,) the male part of the duotheistic system is known as the "Horned God," the deity of fertility.¹⁸ Looking at gender relations, Mary Jo Neitz noticed an interesting change in the annual Neopagan festival Dragonfest held in Colorado. In 1987, no adornments with horns were worn by women, whereas in 1996, they were quite common. Thus, modern paganism can be seen as a chance to subvert traditional gender roles, even though there are still heteronormative thoughts expressed, as women identified with the "Earth Goddess" and men with the "Horned God." Neitz also encountered increasingly more gay, lesbian and transgender people at the festival. "Pagans tend to be relatively accepting of same-sex relationships, BDSM, polyamory, transgender, and other expressions of gender and sexuality that are marginalized by

mainstream society. Accordingly, sexual minorities have flocked to the movement and have begun to articulate a distinctively queer Pagan spirituality.”¹⁹

Both male and female horned goddesses were known in ancient Egyptian Mythology, e.g. Hathor, a female with cow horns and a sun disk, or the male Khnum with ram horns²⁰.

With regard to model photography, the association with the godly is quite conceivable, not just because staged photography is often about embodying feelings, thoughts, and concepts, such as the divine, but also because models report feeling “elevated” when posing for the camera.

Masculinity

As just shown, many associations with horns seem to be linked to the masculine. This also fits in with examples from different cultural contexts and from history. The ram with two horns mentioned in Daniel 8:3 represents the kings of Media and Persia^{21 22}. The “belief, that Moses actually descended with solid horns upon his head was devoutly held, and has continued to be believed down to the Middle Ages.”²³ Even later it was assumed that the Egyptian god Mnevis, who was always represented with horns, actually had been Moses himself. Turbans with horns were worn by Mamluks in early 16th century, where they served as a symbol of power and as a reference to Alexander the Great, who was regarded as the prototype of a Muslim ruler²⁴. Horns in pagan antiquity were seen as representations of personal status within a community, including rulership and nobility.²⁵ However, there have been horned headdresses for women during the 15th century in Britain: coronets formed of padded material or metal mesh had a shape similar to horns, but did not evoke the idea of real horns or a hybrid creature²⁶. The depiction of Viking warriors with small lateral horns on their helmets dates back to the Swedish artist Gustav Malmström, who illustrated “The Saga of Frithiof”²⁷ – because “nothing embodies the image of strength and power better than a fearless warrior wearing a proud helmet properly adorned with ornaments taken from vigorous animals [...] The horns are a symbol of the necessity to always confront one’s obstacles [...] of a furious clashing of heads to show male prowess.”²⁸ Even in paganism, the significance of women with horns derives from the significance of men with horns.²⁹

The association of horns and masculinity can be attributed to the fact that more male than female animals carry impressive horns or antlers. It might also date back to antiquity, where horns were believed to be signs of male strength and power and “vital to the enhancement of sexual activities:”³⁰ accordingly, “the horns growing out of the head [...] were by extension construed to be ritually sacred, and presumed to ramify the areas where the flow of semen was especially intensified,”³¹ which is exemplified by the Minoan bull of ancient Crete.

Another association could be the hunt that has always been more associated with men, known from the earliest division of labour between women and men.³² The deer, mute by

nature and typically an object of (male) desire, is hunted by men, and ultimately killed, the horns or antlers used as a trophy. The terms “desire” and “trophy” already signal a possible connection to the feminine. Following this train of thought, the horns stand for an untamed woman who must be “captured” and made useful, and consequently must give up the wild — her horns. This fits in with the depiction of many photos of female models with horns: they are often shown astonishingly “cultivated,” with flowers and chains decorating the horns, and with elaborate costumes.

The Natural

The deer is close to nature in two ways: it is an animal, a creature considered more natural than humans, and it lives untamed. Some horned species such as goats or cows can be domesticated, whereas others like deer or gazelles are typically not kept as farm animals or pets. Humans, on the other hand, rather combine nature and culture: “Man is a creature of *nature*, insofar as he *is* his (biological) body, and he is a creature of *culture*, insofar he (by socialization), *has* his body.”³³ Of course, nature and culture cannot be separated, as culture cannot exist without the base of nature and always refers to nature. The human, wearing horns, is a specific example for the connection or unity of nature and humanity. It can be interpreted as people expressing their natural side or appropriating nature — the latter possibly in an aggressive act.

On the other hand, the photographed creatures appear more as hybrids than as people wearing headdresses, so that the horns growing out of the head can also be seen as an external sign of inner naturalness.



The black nose indicates a snout, the white freckles indicate the spots on the fur of a fawn. The result is a hybrid creature that looks cute, shy, wild and cultured at the same time. Model: Alina. Photographer and Headdress: Olic Lens.

Shamanism

Shamanism is a spirituality described as close to nature, typical for hunter-gatherer cultures (even though it is not a necessity.³⁴) “The role of the shaman as a mediator between the human world and the world of the spirits is known worldwide.”^{35 36} This spirituality is coined by its connection to and respect for nature³⁷ and contains psychological and social dimensions.³⁸

Horns, not only as headdress but as integral component, are typical for shamanism: “the horns [...] have been varyingly important, but always significant, for the magician of the hunt and for the shaman. The horns have continued to be associated with shamanism in both hemispheres, since remote antiquity. They are believed to be the seat of shaman’s power; particularly, the single horn in the center, still to be detected in the old European unicorn lore,”³⁹ and in Russian folklore Yakut shamans were said to have grown bull horns on their heads.⁴⁰ Devlet refers specifically to antlers and their shape: “The antlers [...] represent a link with a shaman-ancestor, it is though through their resemblance to a plant’s roots in the context of a metaphorical ‘family tree.’”⁴¹

Furthermore, there is an interesting connection to the Devil: the typical depiction of the Devil with its horns can be also explained as a degradation of the horned shamans and the deer cult, as Christian priests wanted to spread the new religion.⁴²

Looking at photo modelling, “our whole acting industry comes from a shaman tradition. Makeup, costumes, staging, musical scores design for the performance, and even special effects were invented by shamans.”⁴³ If one regards shamans as a starting point for any kind of staging, the topic of horned hybrid beings inevitably comes to mind.

The Tribal

The tribal can be seen as an extension of the just-mentioned association with shamanism. The fascination for the so-called “exotic” has a long history dating back to photographs taken in colonized areas to fuel Orientalist fantasies, continuing to the presentation of humans of different physique in ethnological expositions, through the Hippies of the 60's and 70's⁴⁴, and on to today’s Boho movement, integrating aspects of “exotic” cultures in their own fashion, music, and interior decoration.

“We often still think of other cultures as somehow ‘closer to nature,’”⁴⁵ especially tribal cultures, even though this assumed closeness to nature might not be recognized by tribal cultures themselves. This imagination makes us experience “nostalgia.” The term has its origin in the spatial and was understood as a kind of homesickness. Later, a shift of meaning from the spatial to the temporal happened, but “even Kant and Rousseau address the fundamental inseparability of these two dimensions of homesickness,

which still plays a central role [...]: the talk about the ‘digital natives’ and the ‘digital immigrants,’ for example, is between the same semantic poles”⁴⁶.

Space and time are closely connected since it takes time to overcome space, which in turn changes over time — at least since industrialization. Consequently, nostalgia has become a longing for the unattainable. With regard to photography, this is reflected by Susan Sontag,⁴⁷ who wrote about the wish to return to a “purer” epoch characterized by handicraft instead of industrial production. In this way, the foreign can generally be understood as a reminder on the own culture’s past — a time that might have been hard and in some ways terrible to live in for most of today’s people, but in other respects fulfilling and pleasant.

Close to the term “nostalgia” is also “Romanticism.” Historical Romanticism was a counter-movement to Classicism, which along with the Enlightenment demystified the world, whereas Romanticism indulged in the wild and untameable nature, and the mystical endlessness — things we tend to miss in our present. In this way, horned creatures are anything but classicist, they are mythical, perhaps enchanting, in any case unexplainable, and might refer to a “new Romanticism” that again focuses on feelings instead of rationality.⁴⁸

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Due to the image processing the picture resembles an old photograph, which adds to the feeling of nostalgia. Model: Sonja Saur. Headdress: Marén Söhnlein — Maskenzauber.

Maleficent

As we are looking at an aspect of pop culture it is necessary to look at other popular cultural products that depict hybrids with horns. Most prominent is the Disney film “Maleficent”, which deals with a well-known fairytale, Sleeping Beauty. It was released in 2014, approximately 5–7 years after the trend of shooting horned creatures emerged in model photography.

Unlike the previously mentioned associations, which were primarily male, Maleficent is female, a fairy with horns that at first glance seems to be princess Aurora’s antagonist. However, the story takes a different path than Disney’s 1959 version of the Sleeping Beauty. Maleficent was abused by a man from the patriarchal human realm, and her wings were cut off. This turned her into an “evil” fairy, yet, as the fairytale develops, she is revealed to be more complex. In the end, the kiss of true love that saves Aurora is not the kiss of a (male) prince, but the platonic kiss of Maleficent.

Thus, Maleficent is inverting Disney’s typical visions of perfect women, the “idealization and romanticisation of female passivity and submission”⁴⁹ in many ways: “Lately, films have rejected the archetypes of perfect princess and wholly evil villainess seen in the original Disney’s Sleeping Beauty. Instead, they deconstruct these narratives with developed female characters, emphasizing the damage of the patriarchy and women’s search for wholeness.”⁵⁰ Maleficent is powerful, which finds its visual expression in her horns, but also in the black, shiny dress she wears on the movie poster that reminds of the styling of a dominatrix — thus, makes her appear anything but submissive. Having power means having the power to decide: Maleficent can use her power for good or for evil, so her hybridity can represent the individual’s dark side or, more generally, the freedom to choose.⁵¹ This freedom is reflected in the symbol of the horned hybrid because it combines the human and the animal. The horned hybrid is perceived very ambivalently, as it is associated with good as well as evil, and with gods as well as demons.

The Gendered Hybrid

As previously mentioned, with the exception of Disney’s new creation “Maleficent”, it is mainly the male that is associated with horns. Yet, horns are predominantly used by female models, with the hybrid depicted as either forceful or timid, elegant or cute. Of course, there are far more female models in the scene as a whole, but this doesn’t explain why the topic is so popular among them. It rather suggests that a gender aspect plays a role, gender understood as a process, as “doing gender.”⁵²

This has several implications. First and foremost, the motif establishes a connection between women and nature, reminiscent of the dualism of woman-nature and man-culture that “is used as justification for exploitative attitudes and actions of men toward women.”⁵³ For a long time, “in Western patriarchal culture, both women and nonhuman nature have been devalued alongside their assumed opposites — men and

civilization/culture”⁵⁴. The argument can even be carried to extremes: “women are not merely likened to animals in order to devalue and undermine them. They are silenced by being turned into animals, unable to speak words.”⁵⁵ Thus, they are pictured as mute and at the same time as tamed, expressed by the embellishments they are wearing. The association of the horned female as “trophy” is especially obvious, as we talk about “shooting” a picture just as shooting a wild animal. In addition, there is the aspect that the photographers in the scene are more often male than female.

Furthermore, the hybrid creature can be linked to a woman expressing her masculine side or to an intersex subject: cultural representations of intersex subjects and hybrid creatures “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.”⁵⁶ The woman, made powerful and — following this line of thought, masculine — by her horns, is considered as uncanny, perhaps therefore also fascinating. The transgressive may also imply a certain sexual attraction. This reminds one of the description of the Greek Amazons, female warriors, who “shared in the strengths of both sexes and were stronger than either.”⁵⁷

However, the female models themselves I am in touch with mostly have not reported any of these interpretations — even though they could play a significant role when it comes to the unconscious motives for staging horned women. The models, both in my survey, as well as in informal conversations, usually stressed the connection to nature and the appreciation of nature. Yet, females with horns can be read as a statement about the oppression of both women and nature, which shows itself in the destruction of the environment.⁵⁸ This matches the basis of ecofeminism, a movement that dates 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,”⁵⁹ an increasingly virulent topic.

Further, the connection to spirituality was mentioned, sometimes more concretely, to Neopaganism. As Neitz’ study of Dragonfest showed, “Neopagans are opening up new possibilities for conceptualizing and enacting sexualities”⁶⁰ and challenging binary understandings. Staging oneself as a hybrid with horns and (it should be stressed) as feminine hybrid, can mean that a male domain is taken over not just as mere copying, but in a creative and feminine way, by staging creatures that combine features of women and animals.

In general, the embodiment of a hybrid can also mean crossing the limits of one’s own bodily existence, which was mentioned by most models I talked to. The models, staged as something fantastic like a hybrid creature, represent something surreal, something related to their own wishes, fears and identities⁶¹. Since the woman with horns is extremely ambiguous, the meaning the model gives to the photograph may remain hidden.

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In this production, the poles “wild” and “cultivated” meet in a special way. Model: Freeke den Dulk. Make-up-Artist: Berdien Mulder. Support: Michel Maat. Photographer: Peter Kemp.

Conclusion

Women pose for men, men shoot women. Western cultures are dominated by images in which women represent objects of gaze and men represent subjects of gaze so that the organization of gaze reflects and establishes hierarchical gender relations.⁶² This leads to a change of perspective for the models: “...feminists argue that media images of women are always directed at men and that women are encouraged to look at themselves and other women the way men do.”⁶³

However, the horned woman may not be a motif that primarily pleases men. Ferocious women like the Amazons or dominatrixes, who undermine(d) traditional gender barriers, can be fascinating, and the association of the horns and the woman as a trophy can be exciting — but if the goal was simply pleasing men, there could be much more obvious photo motifs. Furthermore, none of the models I talked to said they would like to be staged with horns in order to present the resulting images to her boyfriend or husband. Thus, in general, this reasoning may not be true for most hobby models. The horned

woman-motif rather expresses something about the model — what exactly, remains deliberately unclear. The model does not have to subject herself to a particular interpretation, she can express her masculine side, her connection to nature, her fascination for the exotic, or even for the demonic — her audience will not know unless she gives an explanation. Therefore, this ambiguity can bring security and freedom, “made possible by photography’s indiscriminating data ratio,”⁶⁴ it records something real and something fake equally well.

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