Daughters of Darkness
Lesbian vampires

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they tuck their daughters into bed, and lock the doors.
they say, we should have killed her back then, when we first knew.
and the daughters lie awake in their beds, and smile.

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— Karen Lindsey, "Vampire" (1)

The return of the Vampire — tall, dark, and irresistibly male — has not yet revived interest in a surprising phenomenon of the 1960s and early 70s: the lesbian vampire film. Although the archetypal vampire in this culture is Dracula, often accompanied by submissive brides and female followers, lesbian vampires have a long and worthy history in literature, legend, and film. Two sources for the lesbian vampire myth have been used extensively by filmmakers. One is the Countess Elisabeth Bathory, a sixteenth century Hungarian noblewoman who was reputed to have tortured and murdered 650 virgins, bathing in their blood in order to preserve her youth. The second source is Joseph Sheridan LeFanu’s Carmilla (1871), an intensely erotic novella recounting the story of the Countess Milarca Karnstein, who lives through the centuries by vampirizing young girls.

One of the earliest classic vampire films, Carl Dreyer’s VAMPYR (1932), is a very free adaptation of Carmilla purged of all suggestions of lesbian sexuality. DRACULA’S DAUGHTER (1936) includes a muted lesbian encounter between the reluctant vampire-woman and a servant girl, suggesting an important class dynamic to the lesbian vampire myth. When the seducer is another woman, she must derive her power from her class position rather than her sex. BLOOD OF DRACULA (American International, 1957) combines this class element with the classic stereotype of the schoolgirl/teacher lesbian relationship. The socially dominant teacher (who herself is not a vampire), through scientific experiment, turns her powerless student into a bloodsucking monster.

Several other films prior to 1970 — LA DANZA MACABRA (1963), LA
MESCHERA DEL DEMONIO (also called BLACK SUNDAY, 1969), and I VAMPIRI (1957) — also feature female vampires who exhibit greater or lesser degrees of interest in their own sex. Two films based on Carmilla — Roger Vadim's ET MOURIR DE PLAISIR (BLOOD AND ROSES, 1960) and LA MALEDICION DE LOS KARNSTEINS (TERROR IN THE CRYPT, 1963) — exploit particularly well such conventions of the gothic horror genre as historical settings, mysterious castles and aristocratic characters, as well as the dream sequences of surrealism, to draw us into their fantasy landscapes. Although, like all vampire films, these pre-1970 examples express a nostalgia for death and a subtle "juxtaposition of erotic and macabre imagery," after 1970 filmmakers began to explore the explicit connections between sex and violence, not only in a heterosexual context but in a lesbian one as well. One impetus for these films was certainly the desire to capitalize on the market for pornography, since the lesbian vampire genre can allow nudity, blood, and sexual titillation in a "safe" fantasy structure. The English company, Hammer Films (responsible for the Christopher Lee Dracula series as well), based its exploitation trilogy — THE VAMPIRE LOVERS (1970), LUST FOR A VAMPIRE (1971), and TWINS OF EVIL (1971) — on the ubiquitous Carmilla. These Hammer films connect the proven conventions of the genre — a gothic girls school, black magic, moonlit lakes, and period costumes — with modern expectations of overt sex and blood. A final Carmilla of the period was LA NOVIA ENSANGRENADA (1972).

On the other hand, COUNTESS DRACULA (1971), LA NOCHE DE WALPURGIS (1970), and BLOOD CEREMONY (1973) were each inspired by the legend of the Countess Bathory. COUNTESS DRACULA, another Hammer film, is particularly interesting in that the vampire countess attempts to consume the personality and body of her own daughter, a suggestive parallel to the version of mother-daughter relationships popularized by Nancy Friday (My Mother, My Self) and Ingmar Bergman (AUTUMN SONATA).

Finally, a number of films developed lesbian themes independent of either Carmilla or the Countess Bathory. American-International graduate Stephanie Rothman is moderately sympathetic to lesbianism in THE VELVET VAMPIRE (1971), although she stops short of allowing her women full expression of their attraction. She also introduces a feminist twist: the vampire halts in her pursuit of the female victim to attack a rapist. Jean Rollin's LA FRISSON DES VAMPIRES (1970), on the other hand, is a striking articulation of the male fantasy of the "butch" lesbian, complete with metal chains and black leather boots. He also makes explicit a theme that is implicit in most of these films and in our culture as a whole: that lesbians and homosexuals are narcissists capable of making love only to images of themselves. Hammer's vampires seduce young women strikingly similar to themselves. Rollin's lesbian is finally reduced to sucking the blood from her own veins.

This brief filmography suggests that lesbian vampire films use many of the stereotypes that have been attached to lesbianism at least since the nineteenth century: Lesbian sexuality is infantile and narcissistic; lesbianism is sterile and morbid; lesbians are rich, decadent women who seduce the young and powerless. But the fact that the lesbian vampire myth returned with such force and popularity in the films of the early 1970s suggests to me that an additional factor may have been added by the specific historical developments of the 60s and 70s: feminism and public awareness of lesbianism.

The lesbian vampire, besides being a gothic fantasy archetype, can be used to express a fundamental male fear that woman-bonding will exclude men and threaten male supremacy. Lesbianism — love between women — must be vampirism; elements of violence, compulsion, hypnosis, paralysis, and the supernatural must be present. One woman must be a vampire, draining the life of the other woman, yet holding her in a bond stronger than the grave. Pirie, excusing the
negative stereotype of the female vampire (which he notes appears at exactly the time women were challenging such degrading images), argues,

"The function of the vampire movie is precisely to incarnate the most hostile aspects of sexuality in a concrete form."[4]

But it is necessary to ask why and in what form hostile sexuality gets incarnated in the lesbian vampire film.

The male vampire has been used to suggest that heterosexuality is sometimes indistinguishable from rape: the recent Frank Langella DRACULA crudely overemphasizes this identification. The function of the lesbian vampire is to contain attraction between women within the same boundaries of sexual violence, to force it into a patriarchal model of sexuality. By showing the lesbian as a vampire-rapist who violates and destroys her victim, men alleviate their fears that lesbian love could create an alternate model, that two women without coercion or morbidity might prefer one another to a man.

Although direct parallels between social forces and popular culture are risky at best, the popularity of the lesbian vampire film in the early 1970s may be related to the beginnings of an international feminist movement, as a result of which women began both to challenge male domination and to bond strongly with each other.[5] Since feminism between 1970 and 1973 was not yet perceived as a fundamental threat, men could enjoy the sexual thrill provided by images of lesbian vampires stealing women and sometimes destroying men in the process. The creators of those images — like the pornographic filmmakers who appeal to male fantasies with scenes of lesbianism — must have felt secure enough in their power and that of their primarily male audience to flirt with lesbianism and female violence against men. It is suggestive that lesbian vampires no longer populate the screen (not even to relay the myth's normative message to women: if you value your neck, stick with your man.) Today men do not want to see themselves the victims, but the perpetrators of sexual violence; they want to see women subdued and violated by men, not other women. The explicitly male sexual threat of Dracula is the message for the 80s.

The myth of the lesbian vampire, however, carries in it the potentiality for a feminist revision of meaning. The Karen Lindsey poem that prefaces this essay tells us that sexual attraction between women can threaten the authority of a male-dominated society. The lesbian vampire film can lend itself to an even more extreme reading: that in turning to each other, women triumph over and destroy men themselves.

One film that is considerably ambiguous about the lesbian vampire and thus lends itself particularly well to a feminist interpretation, is DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS (LA ROUGE AUX LEVRES, 1970; a Belgian film directed by Harry Kumel). I saw this film shortly after its release in this country. The audience consisted of aficionados of soft porn, followers of the new wave intrigued by the presence of Delphine Seyrig, and a large contingent of lesbians curious about the film's advertised display of lesbianism. My analysis of DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS is intended to raise some questions about the meaning of the archetype and the possibilities of interpreting hostile images from a feminist perspective. It is certainly limited by the fact that these lesbian vampire films are simply not around any longer and available for careful study. But I hope that my ideas stir some discussion and a revival of interest in this lost genre.

DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS opens in Ostend, off-season, where a newlywed couple — immaculate, handsome, a veritable Barbie and Ken — have stopped on their way to England to break the news of their marriage to his family. They epitomize the perfect heterosexual couple, except that he turns out to be a sexual sadist and his "mother" is really an aging homosexual lover. The other visitors at the hotel are a beautiful countess who appears only at night and her devoted female
companion. She is, of course, the Countess Bathory (Delphine Seyrig), who has returned to the Ostend hotel after a thirty-year absence as young and fresh as ever. (Diet and lots of sleep, she explains, have prolonged her youth.) While her assistant distracts the newlywed husband, the Countess seduces his willing bride. (The bride is fed up with her husband's overt sadism, preferring the subtleties of a bite on the neck.) The vampire assistant is killed — it is not clear how — by the husband, who then confronts his bride and the Countess. In the midst of their altercation, the two women conveniently shatter a crystal bowl over his hands, exchange a look equally erotic and hungry, then quickly clamp their lips to his wrists. La rouge aux levres — blood on the lips. The new lovers drive off into the sunrise, only to end in a fiery automobile crash which, in accordance with traditional vampire lore, ends the Countess's reign by impaling her on a tree branch. But the Countess's spirit immediately transmigrates into the body of the young bride, who then returns to the hotel to seduce another willing victim.

Kumel places DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS solidly within the gothic horror tradition through his use of the empty hotel (equivalent in effect to the mysterious castle), aristocratic characters, and an evocative use of color. The Countess with her bleached white hair and silver lamé gowns suggests the glamour of death, the assistant in solid black reminds us of night terrors, the blood red of violent sexuality marks the dissolves between scenes. The film evokes the atmosphere of the vampire genre and carries its message that woman-bonding is unnatural and dangerous. At the same time it also, as critics have noted, suggests the myth's radical potential.

Pirie notes that "the overall framework of ideas [in the film] is not just sexual but political," limiting its political stance, however, to that of a class analysis of bourgeois decadence and alienation. I think, however, that DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS can be given a feminist reading that uncovers a lucidly anti-male as well as anti-bourgeois political stance. The "anti-male" bias inherent in the lesbian vampire myth can be expressed and seen as a justification for women's suppression. But it also can be interpreted by feminists as a justified attack on male power, a revenge fantasy, and a desire for separation from the male world. The following analysis of DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS further explains these ideas.

The lesbian vampire myth, to begin with, is a variation of the classic triangle: man and female vampire battling for possession of a woman. Pirie notes that lesbian vampire films such as DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS often incorporate the motif of the honeymoon. (The honeymoon also appears in some heterosexual vampire films, and in satires of the horror genre, such as THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW.) I would suggest that this is because the honeymoon, traditionally, is a transitional period during which the husband asserts his power and control over his bride, winning or forcing her into institutionalized heterosexuality. For the husband, then, the honeymoon period provides fear and anxiety. Will he prove potent enough, both sexually and socially, to "bind" his bride to himself and the marriage structure? Bondage and discipline in DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS is used as a highly appropriate symbol of the husband's fledgling power over his bride. (In LA FRISSON DES VAMPIRES, male power is mocked by the lesbian vampire's chains.) The virgin-bride, linked to the institution of heterosexuality by socialization rather than by experience, is particularly vulnerable to the blandishments of a sinister sexual force. Women must be forced into marriage, into "normal" womanhood, since, left to their own designs, they might be as easily attracted to a "perverse" form of sexuality, whether extramarital, diabolical (possession by the devil), or lesbian.

It is essential that in a film that explores this male fear of heterosexual inadequacy, the point of view be firmly and unambiguously male. The male viewer or reader must be able to step in imaginatively to take over when the situation has reached the appropriate level of sexual arousal,
thus potentially spiraling out of control. The film's heterosexual context
must be very clear; lesbianism must be presented as an aberration. This
is the function of the lesbian interlude in a pornographic film. The male
viewer, excited by the promise of stepping in to separate two women
and thus prove his superior prowess, is able to affirm both his sexual
potency and his masculine superiority at the same time.

When the lesbian is also a vampire, he has an added explanation for the
attraction one woman might have for another. It is not he who is
inadequate, he is competing with supernatural powers. A man, who
offers his woman life through his sexual potency (symbolized by sperm)
cannot compete with the vampire who sucks away her life (symbolized
by blood). Instead, he must destroy the vampire — the lesbian — who
threatens male power through sexual attacks on women. For, in fact,
whether the woman vampire is lesbian or heterosexual, her real object
of attack is always the male.

This is the message contained within the fantasy structures of the
lesbian vampire genre. But in DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS,
heterosexuality is of a decidedly ambiguous character. The only male in
the film is unsympathetic and hardly a character men might care to
identify with, since he is himself sexually aberrant, the kept man of an
elderly transvestite. Furthermore, because of his own homosexuality, he
is particularly insecure and vulnerable in relation to his bride. He thus
abuses his male "privilege" of establishing control over his woman. His
sadism and murderousness is outside the conventions of gothic fantasy
since he himself is not a vampire: he is a simple killer. And he is an
ineffective one as well, since he ends up the victim of the vampires, one
of whom is his own bride. Although the purpose of the lesbian vampire
myth is to provide a way for men to soothe their sexual anxieties,
DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS accentuates that anxiety instead.

Furthermore, Delphine Seyrig is a very atypical lesbian vampire. She is
a mature woman, unlike many other lesbian vampires who appear
young and themselves vulnerable. This, in addition to her off-screen
celebrity, gives her an aura of authority. She is never shown nude and is
thus not vulnerable to male prurience as most lesbian vampires are. In
the film she is the sexual and political equal of, if not superior to, the
male character. She is never shown actually attacking the young bride;
there are no bites on the neck, no bared fangs.

Instead, we see Seyrig sitting with a distracted look on her face, her
hand gently stroking the hair of her original assistant. Or we see her
hand wander slowly toward the bride more to protect her from her
husband than to threaten her. She is portrayed as being a sophisticated,
intelligent, motherly, and fascinating woman. If there were any lingering
doubts as to her benignity, Seyrig inclines toward a camp interpretation
that dissipates some of the gothic atmosphere. All together, we might
be tempted to doubt that any supernatural means were necessary to
entice the young woman, were we not shown the two vampires sucking
the husband's blood. In this rivalry between man and vampire for
possession of the bride's body and soul, the vampire's power seems
both superior to and more desirable than the man's.

Finally, the ending of the film emphasizes the power of woman and the
attractiveness of lesbianism. The spirit of the Countess immediately
occupies a new body once it is deprived of the old, suggesting that
lesbianism is eternal, passing effortlessly from one woman to another.
No attempt of man or god can prevent the lesbian from passing on her
"curse." The effect of this transference is not at all horrifying, but rather
amusing, almost charming, especially to a lesbian viewer. The stiff-
faced beauty queen, whom we have seen as innocent bride, passive
masochist, and fascinated victim, is now the powerful, immortal lesbian
vampire. Any woman, this suggests, can be lucky enough to be a
lesbian.

I am not arguing that DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS in itself is a
feminist film, although Kumel seems to be manipulating our expectations of the genre. As an academic and film historian, he must certainly have been aware of his effects. This seems especially likely since it is reported that he would not have made the film without Seyrig, because of whom many of the negative aspects of the lesbian vampire stereotype are mitigated. But it is when the viewer is herself a lesbian and feminist that the film takes on a kaleidoscope of meaning. It shows lesbianism as attractive and heterosexuality as abnormal and ineffectual. It carries a subtle message justifying man-hating that casts in a political light the traditional fear-of-woman theme inherent in vampire mythology. It gives the last laugh to the Countess Bathory and not to the vampire hunters. It is filmed with style and humor, not with horror and violence. It suggests that women have good reasons for turning away from sadistic men to other women and even justifies, to a limited extent, the elimination of men.

It suggests finally that the lesbian vampire theme — although originally misogynistic and anti-lesbian — can be revised and reinterpreted, thus opening it to use by feminists. (9) The myth has been used to attack female autonomy and bonding, and to express male fear of women. A feminist reading of DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS suggests that feminists can transform this myth (as we are transforming the patriarchal myth of witchcraft for example). The many daughters of Carmilla and the Countess Bathory still lie awake in their beds smiling, waiting for the kiss of the revitalized lesbian vampire.

Notes:


4. Pirie, p. 100.

5. Sharon Russell, in private correspondence, suggests also,

   "There is some increase in [the] number of films dealing with witches during periods when women's roles increase in importance."

These relations need further study. See Russell's work in Film Reader, 3, pp. 80-90.

6. Werner Herzog, in his recent NOSFERATU, uses the same transference device. After the original vampire dies, his victim immediately takes on the same physical characteristics.

7. Pirie, p. 113.


9. Another delightful revision of the vampire image is Sue Fink's and Joelyn Grippo's "Leaping" as sung by Meg Christian on Face the Music.
deliciously wicked that her powerful sexual nature was hidden for centuries. But the vampire story has always been one of submerged eroticism. In Daughters of Darkness, editor Pam Keesey brings the eroticism of the female vampire front and center with explicit tales from some of the finest contemporary queer writers. Patrick Califia’s “The Vampire” confounds conventional views of the subject as he uncovers Sapphic bloodlust in the S/M netherworld. Katherine V. Forrest imagines the lesbian vampire cruising the galaxies in search of bed-and-blood partners in the witty sci-fi adventure “O Captain, My Captain.”
She's got the raven-black hair, the tight leather bodice, the pale skin, and the fangs. The one thing this sexy vampiress doesn't have is a lust for hot male blood. No, only the blood of an innocent young woman will do. And lucky for her, the nightclubs are full of easily swayed bi-curious beauties. However, she'd better be careful to make sure that her next victim doesn't have a handsome young boyfriend or older guardian ready to leap in and save the day, or she might end up in an urn.