

PETER DAY (ED.) (2006) *VAMPIRES: MYTHS AND METAPHORS OF ENDURING EVIL*. AMSTERDAM & NEW YORK: RODOPI. ISBN 9042016698.

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Divided into two parts, the first dealing with the 'legend' of the vampire and the second with 'vampires for the modern mind', this collection of essays comprises an interdisciplinary attempt to excavate the origins of the vampire myth and show how it has come to pervade popular media and culture. Quite reasonably, many of the contributions suppose that the vampire myth has been reworked in changing contexts in order to signify emergent social concerns and cultural anxieties. One could argue with confidence that popular culture has 'darkened' considerably over the past decade. As a quick indication of this, consider the gradual stepping up of gothic motifs in movie franchises built around such cultural icons as Batman, Spiderman, and Harry Potter. One staple of the rampant gothicization of the mainstream is most certainly the ubiquitous vampire. There has been an avalanche of vampire product in film, television and literature (particularly 'dark fantasy' or 'paranormal romance' titles by Stephanie Meyer, Charlaine Harris, Laurell K. Hamilton and others). So the expectation of the reader is likely to be that the book will open up lines of enquiry providing inroads into the pervasive phenomenon of twenty-first century gothic. Some of the contributions do this to an extent, but the discussions rarely push far enough and are generally content to rest with fairly well established approaches to the gothic.

The vampire, of course, has long been flapping in the shadows. As David Punter and Glennis Byron observe, 'no other monster has endured, and proliferated, in quite the same way – or been made to bear such a weight of metaphor' (2004: 268). The critical consensus has been that this monster should be read as an expression of transgressive cultural impulses, associated with a wide range of

boundary-crossings, deviations, abnormalities and alterities. Punter and Byron's gloss on the vampire's critical reception outlines some of the various approaches taken, from those which focus on its socio-political significance in terms of the parasitism of capitalism, consumerism or the aristocracy, to those which dwell on the psycho-sexual dimension of vampirism, foregrounding concepts of repression and ambivalence. These approaches typically overlap and are amply represented in this collection. In terms of socio-political context, the question of whether vampire fiction is aligned with conservative ideological positions, or the subversion of same, is unsurprisingly crucial here. In short, do tales of the vampire afford the monster its fangs or do they de-fang evil? Famously, Rosemary Jackson's landmark study, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), suggested that fantasy tales can be understood as either working to maintain the status quo in a secular, scientific modern world, shoring up problematic dichotomies by sustaining the notion of evil vanquished by an ultimately impeccable good, or as a source of critique, of interrogation of the world and opening it up to the possibility of change. This latter is their great promise. Jackson argues that a great many fantastic texts are really dedicated to closing the door on change and capping the transgressive impulse. She dismisses high, magical fantasy – C.S. Lewis's Narnia tales, for example – because they are nostalgic, religious texts, quick to strip the fantastic of its 'existential dis-ease' (1981: 9). They too readily expel and disavow our darker desires. She is more interested in those texts that abide with and explore transgression, and refuse to compromise their critical and interrogative potential. Fantasy can invert and assemble elements of the world in order to bring them into new relationships, to push them to unleash something new. It can transgress the boundaries erected by bourgeois ideology to draw into the light those aspects of social existence, which the bourgeois order has repressed and rendered invisible. As epigraph, Jackson employs Goethe: 'Only the perverse fantasy can still save us'.

One could be forgiven for supposing that the vampire provides excellent fuel for such perverse fantasy. However, in the present volume, through analysis of Gautier's tale of the female vampire, Clarimonde, and Stoker's seminal 'Dracula', Nursel Icoz ultimately concludes that, some ambiguities and lacunae notwithstanding, nineteenth-century vampire fictions actually bolstered the prevailing order. They removed the sting from the allure of revolutionary transgression by channelling the gothic's energies towards vicarious fulfilment of desire in reactionary fashion because the monstrous must ultimately be vanquished once these appetites have been

slaked. Inhuman, invisible forces are put to bed once more and patriarchal order is restored: 'Their horrors, transgressions and sexual license are exploited to deter a bourgeois reading public from revolutionary action even as they provide the public with a temporary fulfilment of ungratified desire' (221).

Similarly, in a chapter on the tension between attraction and repulsion governing representations of the female body in Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist art, Lois Drawmer illustrates how works by male artists such as Rossetti and Burne-Jones could be conceived as reactionary responses to anxieties around the rise of the women's movement and its challenge to phallic power. They mobilised Victorian preoccupations with dangerous, pathological female sexuality together with religious symbolism of euphoric, mystical states to render woman in the image of the vampire, all too ready to drain men of their vital energies and spread their foul infection. Terry Phillips' chapter also focuses on the felt concerns of the *fin-de-siècle*, arguing that the fear of death which drove late Victorian gothic fiction was pre-eminently figured through the image of the bloodsucking female. Those who thought the Great War would bring a cleansing violence and an end to the anaemia of the vampirically besieged male were to be disappointed, as, to the contrary, trench narratives perpetuated the theme of the vampiric return of the dead and merely deepened the predicament. In these tales, war, itself rendered as vampiric adversary, conflated existential and gendered anxieties: 'The vampire figure expressed such confused horror and fear, fear of women and fear also of the dead whose presence transformed No Man's Land into a kind of Forbidden Zone' (77).

Fiona Peters' contribution seeks to resist the temptation to align the vampire so readily with the female, as well as with capitalism, war, and – the usual suspect – death, and instead follows a Žižekian route to conceive of the monster as the Thing in itself, the Real, and as such not condemned to 'vegetate in the Symbolic' like mere mortals (Žižek cited, 178). The vampire, in Žižek's Lacanian schema, actually has more of life than do we, for she has not become subject, she has eluded enclosure within the symbolic order. In this view, of course, ambivalence is still paramount. We are fascinated by the Thing – the subject's formation is precisely organized against the traumatic excess of the Real, driven to escape it but endlessly producing again this alterity as a remainder which fascinates, which keeps uncannily returning and invading. This is the sublime pull of the Real which is in fact, for Žižek, our 'traumatic kernel'. The

vampire is this outside, this foreign body which is always already inside, reminding us that we ourselves cannot fully live, 'are already half dead, trapped in a pre existing symbolic network' (182). Lacking nothing, vampires dispense with mirrors. For Žižek, vampires 'have read Lacan', they exist to materialize and taunt us with that which eludes us (Žižek cited, 184).

Psychoanalytic explanations of the ambivalent pleasures of horror abound, of course, and we might be justified in wondering why the contributions to this collection seem by and large unwilling to bring the vampire into an encounter with more innovative work in cultural studies and other disciplines. Deleuzian theory, in particular, has posed a significant challenge to psychoanalytic conceptions of desire. Hyun-Jung Lee's chapter here, through an analysis of Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Carmilla', the tale of a lesbian vampire, perhaps gestures towards a different ontology of desire. For Lee, vampirism figures desire in terms of a depersonalizing, self-annihilating process, linking to an experience of 'being-before-selfhood' which frees the subject to 'take up an unbounded, mutable, alternative state of being' (33). Such a reading of the tale commends the notion of a threat to Victorian subjectivity which suggests development through recourse to the work of Deleuze and other philosophers of the virtual, but ultimately, Lee's reference points are still psychoanalytical theories of abjection such as those found in the work of Julia Kristeva and Kelly Hurley.

Perhaps the most rewarding and challenging read in the collection is, indeed, the only contribution which seriously attempts to draw on post-psychoanalytic conceptions of desire. James Tobias deals with networked subjectivity, specifically the way that vampiric identifications and their traversals of various virtual border zones, gendered and racial, inflect and complicate the notion of the cyborg. Tobias suggests that '(b)oth transformative potential and destabilizing violence are bound up in the cyborg-vampire embrace' (169). He concludes with a discussion of the 1995 anime film, *Ghost in the Shell*, in which the super-assassin heroine, Motoko, ultimately embraces the power of the vampiric Puppet Master who pursues her and thereby vastly increases her mobility and power to act. She becomes a 'creature of affect': 'Affect, in Deleuze and Guattari's formulation, is the experience of bodies that produce translations and transformations, beings built for shifting borders' (171).

Such a sympathetic conception of the vampire is not, in fact, new, even if the Deleuzian framework is. Even at the fin-de-siecle, as

Drawmer's chapter shows, for example, female artists such as Evelyn De Morgan contested the male vision of the female vampire as pathological and infectious, exploring images such as 'Medusa as a wronged woman' (51), the predator to be pitied as much as feared. This resonates with contemporary manifestations of the vampire as a 'lonely and misunderstood' (ibid). Twenty-first century vampire fiction routinely expresses sympathy for the vampire. The monster is increasingly humanized, increasingly desires intimacy, a benign being offered for identification rather than othering. Stacey Abbott's chapter shows that, in American vampire cinema, this is particularly the case in films based in New York, such as Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction* (1995). Here, the vampire is at home in urban surroundings, emerges from, rather than invades, the city. These films take up aspects of the independent, arthouse film-making tradition associated with New York. They afford their female vampires the power to reclaim the night, privileging her point of view and are quite subversive in their celebration of female desire. The female vampire positively expresses the wilderness and delirium of the city. In Los Angeles based vampire cinema, on the other hand, such as *The Lost Boys* (1987), we find the vampiric gang as opposed to the lone female. The gang's exploits offer a means to explore racial identity, difficult to forge in the fragmented sprawl of the LA context. However, in both cases, the vampire is humanized, thoroughly urbanized.

The thesis of Elizabeth McCarthy's chapter is that the crux of the vampire myth is not the bloodsucking action but rather the inevitable mutilation of the monster. Vampire tales pull antagonistic belief systems together, as in Stoker's character, Van Helsing, through whose actions, modern medicine, religious belief, and folklore come together to attack the vampire body. The primary target for spectacular penetration via a stake through the heart, sometimes depicted in vampire cinema much like a gang rape, is the female vampire (whereas the staked male vampire body more often than not makes a swift transition from presence to absence, body to dust). It is here, in the prolonged spectacle of the mutilated female vampire body that we can discover the 'questionable ethics of moral force' crucial to vampire myth and fiction. As readers, McCarthy advises, we need to be more acutely aware of the 'dubious ethics' of vampire narratives which 'suggest that power and truth belongs to those who can most radically inscribe the body through violence and mutilation' (204).

Finally, a couple of the essays gathered here usefully point in the direction of concepts of simulation and consumption to suggest that, far from reducing the otherness of the vampire, the business of twenty-first century gothic is still to fixate on enigma, to obsess with the hard kernel of the outside inside. Phil Bagust, discussing discourses accreting around the mysterious extinct Tasmanian beast, the Hylacine, suggests that the animal, often associated with vampirism, has come to acquire a cryptozoological afterlife which is best understood in terms of the postmodern media spectacle. The Hylacine – aka Tasmanian Tiger – has become a ‘free-floating signifier’, a locus of ‘gothic panic’, explicable in terms of a contemporary craving for elusive alterity (94). The thread of argument connecting contemporary vampire discourse with postmodern media culture here leads nicely into Meg Barker’s account of the emergence of a subculture made up of overlapping groups of fans, role-playing gamers, blood fetishists and ‘real vampires’. Such identifications – such as in the case, cited here, of Manuela and Daniel Ruda, who exploited the small ads of a heavy metal magazine to contact, murder and drink the blood of a hapless male victim – tend to be associated with cherished feelings of isolation and difference, an imperative to touch base with something more real than is generally offered in an increasingly virtual and frustrating world: ‘real vampirism gives individuals an explanation of their experience of difference’ (119). As Fred Botting has argued in his recent *Limits of Horror*, contemporary gothic ‘preserves the illusion of darkness, death and sexuality in a world given over to the omnipresence of virtual life and light on screens’ (2008: 4). The problem is that gothic promises to disclose ‘another, “realer” if darker reality’ but is itself ‘inextricably entangled in webs of simulation’ (ibid, 5).

And so we return to the question: fanged or fangless? In the twenty-first century, the vampire is at the helm, the gothic is everywhere but perhaps also exhausted. Baudrillard argued that simulations draw out the real and attempt to enhance it in order to reach the more real than real and boost our sense of the real’s presence, but in doing so constitute a ‘hyperreality’ which replaces and supersedes the real. For Botting, the contemporary plethora of vampires exists to put us in thrilling touch with – and to confirm the continued existence of – violent and abject reality but vampires are themselves now mere simulations which actually deter any such contact. Spreading like a virus throughout the culture, the vampire has become all-pervasive, domesticated, part of the extirpation of the dark and the chaotic.

What use is a toothless vampire? What psychic or cultural apparatus can it horrify or support? Except the banal circuits and little thrills of consumer culture. A different kind of release is implied: a release *from* rather than *of* the bats. Just let them go. Put them out of their indulgent misery. Unchain them from the tired cycle of fantasy and vain masquerade (Botting, 2007: 201-2).

So, *oublie* Dracula? I suggest the answer to this is ‘not necessarily’, if we are ready to reconceptualize the vampire along the lines of the ‘translations and transformations’ that Tobias commends in this volume. In this sense, vampires embody the power to produce the new, life’s power of difference. The vampire may yet ‘diagram’ new becomings, practically enlivening the imagination, unfixing our sense of self and opening it to the future.

References

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