

Vampires from Aesthetics to Ethics—1922 to the Present

Penny Rafferty and PUNK IS DADA

In modern times, we are not suffering from alienation with the undead but a provocative over-identification. Society is re-writing the horror genre; now the Vampires, Vrykolakas and Chupacabra act as our evolutionary saviours, rescuing us from that uncertain and timely existence known as life. Life today is less than a desirable product much less sacred; harried, in a perpetual state of anxiety, and ruled by the capitalist mobocracy we call the Market. Life is somewhat inconvenient to most that walk the planet. Boris Groys recently said, during a 2015 lecture entitled *Becoming Cosmic*¹, “that today the question of what happens to the soul/spirit is no longer of our concern, now the question is what happens to the corpse?” He is not the only one speaking of corpses and politics. Mark Fisher’s text, “How to kill a zombie: strategizing the end of neoliberalism”², written in 2008, is still relevant today; as he so poetically cites, “Neoliberalism now shambles on as a zombie—but as the aficionados of zombie films are well aware, it is sometimes harder to kill a zombie than a living person.” And in the words of all those teenage aficionados: “true dat”.

The Zombies, however, are always the ungodly masses, the working classes blundering on, lugging their own rotten bodies around—thoughtlessly and without grace. With only one goal: to eat and devour anything living, be it rat or human. Quite the opposite depiction of our modern-day Vampires, in which Vampires are no longer the pale, sickly, half-rotten counterparts of humanity they once were, looking back at *Nosferatu the Vampire* from the 1922 adaptation of Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*—with his oversized ears, fangs, and vintage smock, he would never have walked amongst the living undetected. Even less likely is the living lusting after him almost to the point of irritation, like the Vampire Eric Northman from the HBO series *True Blood*, who has women and men alike offering themselves up to him on a nightly basis at his club “Fangtasia”, something between a sex club and a social centre for humans and vampires to interact consensually.

Science and the Undead

In the last twenty years, post-humanist ideas and technology have played a strong role in the shift away from the more traditional morals and beliefs of Christianity. This used to be at the forefront of the Western world, making room for science as the great purifier and allowing for the erotic fixation of the immortal soul. Many also fear humanity is nearing extinction from climate change; if we found a way in which we didn’t need sunlight, clean water, and oxygen to survive, we would be independent of the planet and its systems. We could therefore accomplish immortality like our heroic Vampires. However, this is unlike Zombies, who work on the basic principle of *bite = infection = death = reanimation*. When all the living flesh is consumed, the Zombies rot away, as in the hit cult series *The Walking Dead* (2010–present). With no life to leech off of, they have no power—they become extinct. This would solve the problem of the “Neoliberal Zombie” from Fisher’s theory. If we starve them of human flesh, they will rot away for eternity. Fisher states that after a Zombie Invasion, it’s crucial to rethink solidarity and not

consign ourselves to the “atomized individual”. Interestingly, he uses the templates of postmodernist culture to build successful heterogeneous interest groups. With an overall unity in diversity, resources and desires similarly to the clans of the Modern Vampire. He states the new world is more than a logistical problem of resources and power—it is a philosophical one.

The Environment and The Cosmic

Humans have proved themselves to be a force of nature in the last decade with the coining of a new geological epoch known commonly as the Anthropocene, contrary to the previous popular belief that we are the most “natural” living entities on earth. We have created new lands and terrains such as The Pacific Trash Vortex³. Spanning thousands of kilometres from the West Coast of North America to Japan, the collection is mostly waste and plastic debris spiralling into makeshift islands. Yet, we are never shown this seemingly mythical, small country bobbing along with dead sea life trailing behind its man-made arse. It is there if we choose to believe in the scientific studies, or not, if we listen to the “climate change deniers”, who argue it is a fictitious representation from the left wing to stop the growth of industry. This also mimics the horror story of *The Blob* (1958), a strange horrific life form that consumes everything in its path.

We also often hear of the human ability to conjure up and summon terrorists across the globe via Internet chat rooms into our capital cities of the West. Naomi Klein, the leading figure in the climate change campaign after her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs. The Climate*, had an interesting prophecy after the horrific attacks in Paris on November 13th. Klein commented that climate change was one of the key drivers of the civil war in Syria, fuelling conflict, mass migration, and the ever-growing radical group known as ISIS. It is also a result of our ever-changing atmosphere. Klein rejects François Hollande’s claims about choosing between fighting terrorism and acting on climate change⁴. He disallowed demonstrations that were linked to the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris as an act of safety for the people of the city. Klein scoffed at his definition of security, instead asserting that putting climate action at the very centre of that agenda would be the only way to guarantee the safety of humanity, as there is no possibility for human security in a world that is heading towards an increase of three degrees Celsius. This would be the death sentence of everything we now know as human.

What we know as Human is also something constantly in flux with the environment; we are not what we once were. For many modern day Vampires, the choice of synthetic blood over real human blood is to combat the legitimate fear of being poisoned by the ever-increasing amount of synthetic estrogens, hormones, and chemicals put into human blood from birth—from shampoos to pesticides to birth control pills—and that is just from living a relatively “normal life”. However, the human body cell structure is made up of 90% bacteria, fungi, and dormant cells, leaving only 10% that can be dubbed as human, which also brings us down a little from our golden creation⁵.

Politics and the Inhuman

When Western politics are faced with the inhuman world of the occult and ancient religions, we hear of acts from radical sub-factions and their ability to turn people, even our own citizens (Jihadi John, the British Islamic militant fighter or the White Widow, aka Samantha Lewthwaite). The Golden Dawn and ISIS’s need for possession and control of people with which to harvest power only allows the growth of these sects, which are represented in our mainstream media as inhuman.

The latest *Star Wars: Episode VII* is another example of this mainstream fight between the good vs. evil representation of the guerrilla fighter over the decades. It has been the most expensive: a staggering €160–185 million has been spent on production. The film tells the story of a young man who sees Darth Vader as a martyr, and idolizing Vader he fights the state for Vader's freedom. Quite unlike the early films from the 1970s in which the retired Jedi recruit, Luke Skywalker, is trained in secret to fight against the dark imperialist capitalist figure, the then Darth Vader. The Star Wars franchise seems to reflect our position of what we concede as evil and threatening. This has changed drastically from the 1970s' optimism of society to today's threat of the lone wolf who acts out of the passion of belief, bringing anarchy and terror to the global citizen.

Save Us from the Dread of Life

We no longer crave the supernatural as "the other" like society did in the aftermath of World War II. Filmmakers in the US, Europe, and Japan produced films that Susan Sontag termed "popular mythology for the contemporary negative imagination about the impersonal"⁶, which imaginatively addressed post-Auschwitz/post-Hiroshima guilt and anxiety with horror and fantasy so far removed from the viewers' real lives that it acted as entertainment.

Dehumanization as strength is a common theme in the fantasy and horror genres, but it is becoming an increasingly central theme to the young adult dystopian novels and films that are coming out, such as *True Blood*, *Twilight*, *Hunger Games*, *Star Wars*, etc. In all of these, the main characters have to give up their bodies to the supernatural host, but in turn they can conquer and control their newfound strengths. The loss of the human body seems key, perhaps mirroring the despair or loss of humanity to these young viewers, but actually you see their humanity is not lost—just transferred to another being. Does this mirror our need and want for evolution of the human body?

The horror spectator is now entering a new phase in the genre post-*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; it is no longer the fear of death that entertains us but the thought of expelling the dread of life. The populace seeks a world of eternity in their deepest fantasies, not needing to rush from the school to the church to the maternity ward to the grave. We want leisure, nihilism, and above all safety from each other and from our own impending doom. In times of crisis, we think of our own mortality; thanatophobia, or death anxiety, is nullified when we see ourselves stronger than life. Western civilization is faced daily with acts that hinder our survival: raising rent prices, unemployment, GM food, and overcrowding. These may be a far cry from werewolves, zombies, and witches, yet just as deadly as we are placed in feuds between neoliberal lords, extremist "knights", and the ever-growing state magistrum.

Perhaps we can renegotiate these fantasies rather than develop them into a fascist posthuman regime for all. I propose we learn something more, from the league of Vampires we seek on a Friday night after a long eight-hour shift and a TV dinner. Today's Vampires are their own masters, with exception to their makers whom they are fiercely loyal—family must come first. Also, as stated, many choose to drink synthetic and donated ethical blood, fearing contamination or poison by the degradation of the environment not so far removed from "Vitality Air"⁷ (a Canadian company that sells bottled air to the Chinese elite during smog outbreaks in capital cities). Rather than the traditional Vampires who catch their prey in the wake of fear and terror, now they visit bars like "Fangtasia" where willing donors allow them to feed. In mutual fits of sexual ecstasy for both parties, the Vampire is

careful not to allow the human to die in the process of feeding on them, allowing for recovery and the ability to harvest from them again—a sustainable food plan. The other interesting part about modern Vampire life is that they don't seem to engage in menial labour/work; they are writers, philosophers, and musicians pondering the meaning of life. Could the world of the Vampire make room for a post-work economy? Humans have such a short time on this earth, why are we so interested in racing to the finish line, tired, hungry, and exhausted? It is hard to find a Vampire who is fed up with living, depressed at the very thought of continuing his or her life eternally. Nor do we ever hear of racism, sexism, or homophobia in the Vampire world. In fact, in *True Blood* most of the oldest Vampires choose life-long same-sex partners, albeit in a polygamous way.

In both Christianity and Judaism, the belief in the resurrection of the undead en masse on “The Day of Judgment” is the moment of forgiveness when all the sins of the world are washed away and life will begin anew. This is now the time for human self-mastery rather than post-humanist conquests. Can we overthrow the Neoliberalism Zombie in wake for an autonomous mortal life with as much to offer as eternity could? To do this, we must recognise the inherent violence in both heaven and hell, literally and metaphysically. By harnessing the cosmic as a creative force, we can be liberated. Certainly rethinking the values and needs of today's humans is a start; there is a need for micro-units that act out of desire and horizontal unity for the alien, the fluid, and the non-human, and only then will we welcome the “true death”.

Notes

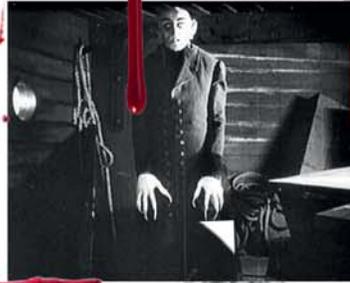
- 1 Boris Groys, “Becoming Cosmic”, November 18, 2014, ZFL, Berlin. <http://www.zfl-berlin.org/zfl-in-bild-und-ton-detail/items/vortragsvideo-boris-groys-new-york-karlsruhe-becoming-cosmic.html>
- 2 Mark Fisher, “How to kill a zombie: strategizing the end of neoliberalism,” *Open Democracy*, July 18, 2013. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/mark-fisher/how-to-kill-zombie-strategizing-end-of-neoliberalism>
- 3 Greenpeace.org, “The Trash Vortex”. <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/campaigns/oceans/fit-for-the-future/pollution/trash-vortex/>
- 4 “Naomi Klein on Paris Summit: Leaders’ Inaction on Climate Crisis is ‘Violence’ Against the Planet.” *Democracy Now!*, November 18, 2015. http://www.democracynow.org/2015/11/30/naomi_klein_on_paris_summit_leaders
- 5 “Microbes in the human body.” The Marshall Protocol Knowledge Base, 2015. <http://mpkb.org/home/pathogenesis/microbiota>
- 6 Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” *Commentary* 40, October 1965. <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-imagination-of-disaster/>
- 7 Vitality Air, promotional website for canned air. <http://vitalityair.com/>

Aesthetics Throughout the Ages

VAMPIRE



Dracula 1931



Nosferatu 1922



Son of Dracula 1943



Blood of Dracula 1957



The brides of Dracula 1960



Playboy shoot 1978



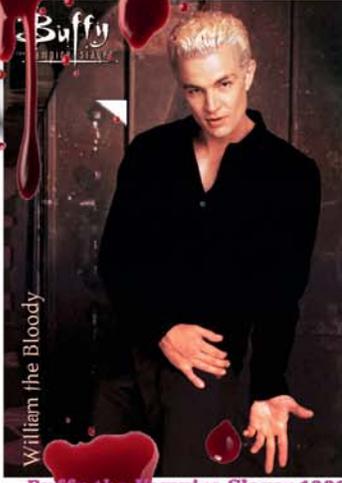
Lair of the White Women 1988



Queen of the Damned 2002



True Blood 2014



Buffy the Vampire Slayer 1990



Twilight Series 2008

Penny Rafferty is a writer and visual theorist based in Berlin. She is heavily involved with the artist collective group Omsk Social Club featuring PUNK IS DADA and pioneered the spectacle Ying Colosseum. She is working intensively with the concept of Cosmic Depression—the theory of depression caused by digital utopia (Paradise without Ecology).

PUNK IS DADA is “futuristically political”, [i.e. unrealistically] proposing the contents and makings as a form of post-political entertainment. The content examines other virtual egos and experiences, allowing the works to become a dematerialized hybrid of modern day culture.

Yet she declares herself an untrend; PUNK IS DADA assumes the visage of poverty in her anti-nostalgic dystopia; she is industrial by nature and de-gendered by style.

“Zen, Speed, Organic: 3 lifestyle diets.”

www.punkisdada.com