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The erotic vampire Cult sexuality goes mainstream

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*Paper for the conference Monstrology,
Aalborg University, October 31 and November 1.*

Note: This paper is a very short version of the article “Batailles godnathistorie – Jean Rollin, *True Blood* og den erotiske vampyr” [Bataille’s bedtime story – Jean Rollin, *True Blood*, and the erotic vampire] that is to be published in the anthology *Monstrology* (2012), edited by Jørgen Riber Christensen and Steen Christiansen.

To sum up ideas about the repulsive monster I’ll talk about sex. My subject here is *the erotic vampire*. The subtitle – *Cult sexuality goes mainstream* – may indicate a certain media historical movement, though, which is not entirely my aim. My main idea with this paper is firstly to draw attention to a French director only a few of you may have heard of. Jean Rollin, as he was called (he died last year), made among his many films no less than eleven films that in some way or another included vampires. To explain the interest in this peculiar monster I will employ the somewhat speculative theories about the connections between eroticism, violence and death by George Bataille. What is interesting about this perspective is that what Jean Rollin did in his films in the late 60’s and early 70’s was – and has been for a while – considered cult film material. But throughout the latest popular vampire phenomenon excessive violence and softcore pornography has become popularized mainstream TV-fiction.

To show where we’re going with this I’d first like to show you a very short clip from the HBO TV-series *True Blood*. And after introducing Jean Rollin’s cinema, I’ll shortly return to the series. In the clip, some of you may identify a few references to the famous bath scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) which, in itself, is an interesting frame of reference in a love scene. The basic framing of the series is that vampires have been proven to exist and now they live side by side with humans. Though it’s not viewed as customary, the main character Sookie has hooked up with the almost 200 years old vampire Bill. When we enter they have allegedly just had sex which is why Sookie has two holes in her neck. Obviously! When they have sex she lets him feed from her.

This short scene is just one of many softcore erotic scenes in the TV-series that has been a huge international hit. Throughout the now four seasons the explicitness of sex and violence reaches more and more bizarre levels. But

what is interesting about this particular scene – and others like it in the series – is that it takes the slowly paced cinematography from horror cinema, in this case from Hitchcock's *Psycho*, and turns it into a sensual caress of eroticism. Nevertheless, the scene maintains the normally horrific depictions of blood running down the body and down the drain as well as the iconographic bite from a vampire that normally would be visualized as something deadly and dangerous. In other words, *True Blood* here turns the style of the horror genre on its head as a way of narrating stories about a certain relationship between eroticism, violence and death. Many of the sex scenes in *True Blood* – including this one – would actually just a few decades ago have been rated softcore pornography. Today it is a part of a mainstream and worldwide phenomenon regarding the erotic vampire.

As a monster the vampire is strangely ambiguous compared to many other monsters in that it is often depicted as being *both* repulsive as monsters normally are *and* highly attractive. This ambivalence moving back and forth between attraction and disgust makes the vampire, as a figure, interestingly obscure if we consult Noël Carroll's acclaimed paradox of horror: We are attracted to that which is repulsive. Considering the vampire, it fits rather poorly with this theory in that we – both the victim as well as the viewer – may be attracted to that which is basically attractive. In an interview Jean Rollin talks about his fascination with the ambivalence of the vampire and says: "A vampire is like an animal, a predator – wild, emotional, naive, primitive, sensual, not too concerned with logic, driven by emotions, but also very aesthetic and beautiful". And what he does in his films is to focus mostly on the sensual, the emotional, the aesthetic and the beautiful vampire.

Throughout his career running from early 60's until his last film last year he objected to the notion that he was making horror cinema. Nevertheless, he has been widely acclaimed within cult film environments. Vampires in his films do of course kill, drink human blood, and lure innocent beings into violent abuse, but it is generally depicted with a visual and narrative charm. Almost every aspect of the vampire mythology is overly exposed in Jean Rollin's vampire iconography. Most of his vampire films wallow in extraordinarily gothic imagery and religious travesty. He has as well granted his love for the aesthetics of the female body which is why his films are packed with female nudity and lesbian eroticism. Critiques of his cinematic style maintain that this style is sexist and charged with the fantasies of the male gaze. This may be so, but Rollin insisted that he did what he did with love for the female body, not with an improper sadistic sexuality.

And for Rollin, the vampire proved to be an exceptional monster that could articulate this special notion of a sensual and morbid connection between

life and death, sex and violence, and attraction and repulsion. His depictions of sex and violence were, at the time when he made his first films, highly transgressive. The first French pornographic film wasn't released until 1975 and in the mid-70's French legislation put considerable sanctions on pornographic depictions of sex. This means that, even though Rollin in his vampire cinema in ten out of eleven films stuck to softcore visualizations, he was bordering on several cultural taboos in his exploitation films. To be able to shoot the included sex scenes in his films it was, for that particular reason, necessary to hire pornstar actresses for the most compromising parts. And when hardcore pornography was legalized in France a few of his actresses went into that scene as well.

And because Rollin generally did transgress taboos he was normally unable to raise money for his films. Others claim that his lack of interest in coherent narration was a notable explanation as well. This meant that he had to raise money some other way, which was why Rollin himself – under several pseudonyms – entered the pornography scene as well. As early as 1973 he directed his first softcore film *Schoolgirl Hitchhikers* which, besides lengthy scenes of female homosexuality, also included extensive sadistic torture scenes.

He mostly used the pseudonym Michel Gentil, which in itself is an interesting symbolic framing of his intentions. The French word 'gentil' means – besides 'gentle' and 'kind' – also 'unbeliever' and Michel is of course the archangel Michael. Collectively, this signals his transgressive style and religious travesty. Later in his career he would as well enter the hardcore scene and here he bridged his interest in vampire cinema and hardcore eroticism in his film with the most charming title *Suck Me Vampire*. This film is from 1975 which is quite early in the history of French hardcore pornography. His use of pseudonyms signals a difference in Rollin's work between *eroticism* in his own name and *pornography* screened behind a pseudonym. I won't show you a clip from that one, though.

I'd rather show you a clip from his third film *Shiver of the Vampires* from 1971. The story may seem recognizable, both because it has many parallels with Sheridan Le Fanu short story "Carmilla", but also because the story line is widely used: A newlywed couple travels to the French country side where they're supposed to visit some relatives of the bride. But when they get there they are, to their surprise, greeted by two almost nude young women (one of them is Marie-Pierre Castel who later was cast for *Suck Me Vampire*). As it later turns out the bride's relatives have become vampires.

The scene that I'm about to show you is the sequence when the bride realizes that vampires dwell in the old, gothic castle. Rollin has himself once writ-

ten that: "In the cinema, nothing is more normal than a woman coming out of a clock at the stroke of midnight" with a specific reference to this scene in *Shiver of the Vampires* – it really doesn't make much sense why the female vampire has cramped herself into the old clock.

The scene combines a lot of the consistent elements of Rollins vampire cinema: lesbian sexuality, gothic imagery, attraction, as well as deadly violence (in this case, though, only the bite). I may have to apologize for my cutting of the clip, but Rollin's narratives are mostly very slow paced. You would expect a scene like this – where a vampire materializes for the first time – to be jumpy and somewhat scary, but Rollin chooses to focus on the mutual attraction between the bride and the vampire. So when you see a kind of a *Star Wars*-wipe in the clip that's where I've cut out two minutes of the two girls walking through the gothic castle.

What is generally interesting about this particular film as well as many other films by Rollin is his visualized love for the deadly female vampire. For Rollin the vampire – being both alive and dead, kind and fierce – really is a concrete materialization of George Bataille's theories about eroticism, violence and death. This reference to Bataille is of course motivated by the general interest in the vampire as an erotic being, but it is as well motivated by Rollin himself. In an interview he tells that his very first memory is of a guy telling him bedtime stories in his bed – and this guy was no other than George Bataille. Bataille had a four year affair with Rollin's mother and the story that Bataille told Rollin – allegedly the same story every night – was about a certain monsieur le Curé, a wolf dressed as a priest. This means that this little anecdote actually comprises the elements that we later find in Rollin's many films: religious travesty ('curé' is a catholic priest in French), eroticism (his mother's relationship) as well as a sense of the supernatural.

In short, Bataille's theories about eroticism deal with the close connection between sexuality and death. In his monography on Bataille, Benjamin Noys connects this relationship with Jacques Lacan's concept *jouissance*: a pleasure that is so extreme that it borders on death. According to Bataille, sexuality resembles death because both negotiate a transgression of the body. Sex transgresses the body through the relationship to the sexual partner while death deals with the end of the body – the basic link would then be violent and sadomasochistic eroticism. It may seem obvious how this philosophical framing as well builds a bridge into religious ideas being a transgression of the body through the closeness of death. Though, "My true church is a whorehouse", says Bataille, which then again as well, of course, is a sexual travesty. The infamous scenes containing sex and deadly violence in his novel *The Story of Eye* that takes place in a church really frames this basic idea.

The interesting part about this very short introduction to Bataille is that the erotic vampire actually comprises the very same elements: sex, violence, and death. It may then come as no surprise that the actions of a vampire has several symbolic similarities with sex: penetration, exchange of bodily fluids, bodily intimacy as a precondition, and fangs as an obvious semiotic visualization of male potency (this is as well underlined in *True Blood* by the fact that the vampire is unable to hold back the fangs when it becomes sexually aroused).

This connection between the sexually charged female vampire (a somewhat excessive *femme fatale*) and death and deadliness is underlined in Rollin's later film *Fascination* from 1979. In a scene close to the end, one of the vampires' helpers wearing almost nothing but an open black cloak grabs a scythe in order to slay another woman. This scene is one of the most famous scenes in Rollin's films and it is well, as you can see here, put on the cover of the Danish dvd-release. The one playing the woman with the scythe in this particular scene is, by the way, the French pornstar actress Brigitte Lahaie. That is: eroticism, violence and death in one basic visualization.

This concludes my very short introduction to the cinema of Jean Rollin. His films are, as it may seem, an acquired taste. And the basic quality of the films does in fact vary a whole lot, but among the many productions there are some really interesting works. Especially his debut film *The Rape of the Vampire* is interesting in its combination of surreal narration, depicted violence, and eroticism. Some of his best work is a noteworthy combination of modernist aesthetics and pulp considerations.

As I promised to begin with I'd return to *True Blood* which, in my view, is the now very popular version of what Rollin did in the 60's and 70's. Cult cinema sexuality has indeed become mainstream TV-fiction. The series employs this combination of sex, violence and death in almost every aspect. In the eventful end scene that I'll show you our vampire Bill is fighting the evil vampire king to save his beloved Sookie, while Sookie herself is fighting a female werewolf. Another vampire is using male homosexuality to murder the king's vampire lover. Alongside, Bill's vampire apprentice is devouring the blood from a dying male werewolf. This ends in a scene where Bill and Sookie have somewhat rough sex. All in just a few minutes. In the series, then, Sookie as a character has developed from a generally naïve and innocent virgin in the beginning of the series (as you expect from the thematic) to a highly sexually active woman. Which will be obvious from this clip.

I think that about says it all!