

Marriage Bites: Lesbian Vampires and the Failure of Heterosexuality in *Daughters of Darkness*

Erin Wiegand

Publication details: *Paracinema* 18, December 2012: 25–27. [please see published version if citing; scan available on request]

In the 1970s, the women's liberation movement was starting to pick up speed. The Stonewall riots sparked an upswing in gay political organizing in the United States. Second-wave feminism was making a lot of men nervous about their role in society and their relationship to women. And in the movie theaters, horror films featuring female vampires were popping up everywhere, an increasing number of them with overt depictions of lesbianism.

While female vampires were showing up in horror films as early as the 1930s, lesbian themes were generally kept fairly subtle; lesbian-vampire films as a genre didn't begin to emerge until the 1960s and only truly flourished in the 70s. Films of this genre tend to follow a formula in which a young woman is seduced into spurning the affections of her husband (or men in general) in favor of an independent, wealthy, self-assured, powerful woman who has recently entered into her life. Frequently, the young woman is newly married; in her essay "Daughters of Darkness: The Lesbian Vampire on Film," Bonnie Zimmerman notes that "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?"¹

¹ Zimmerman, Bonnie. "Daughters of Darkness: The Lesbian Vampire on Film." In *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

The vampire offers the bride an alternative to her life's path as wife and mother but simultaneously must feed off her in order to survive. Instead of allowing for the possibility of romantic love between women, the lesbian vampire's attraction for human women must be portrayed as hypnotic or magical, and ultimately their relationship is shown to be one of predator and prey. In *The Vampire Lovers* (1960), for example, the vampire Carmilla expresses a great love for her friend Emma, but her hunger and sense of self-preservation ultimately wins out; we see that she is not capable of real love, only a need to possess others. In "The Influence of *Dracula* on the Lesbian Vampire Film," Sharon Russell points out that the novella *Carmilla*—the source material for this as well as a great many other lesbian-vampire movies—ends with the protagonist's excitedly imagining that she hears her vampire lover's step in the hall: homosexual love emerges triumphant. In *The Vampire Lovers* and other films, however, the clear message is "the redemption of heterosexual love from the threat of the lesbian. The coupling of death and destruction with love transforms Carmilla from lover to monster."² Zimmerman agrees: "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." The typical lesbian-vampire film concludes with the intervention of a husband or father figure, who destroys the monstrous lesbian and delivers the innocent young woman back into the arms of a man.

In this context, it might be easy to read the 1971 film *Daughters of Darkness* as just another entry in an overtly sexist subgenre of horror film; instead, it slyly subverts the tropes of that genre and offers a critique of male dominance, heterosexuality, and traditional marriage.

Valerie and Stefan (Danielle Ouimet and John Karlen, the latter of *Dark Shadows* fame) are newlyweds on their honeymoon. It's apparently off-peak season when they arrive in Ostend, Belgium, and the hotel they choose is eerily empty. Soon after their arrival, however, the Countess Elizabeth Bathory (Delphine Seyrig) and her "secretary"

² Russell, Sharon. "The Influence of *Dracula* on the Lesbian Vampire Film," *Journal of Dracula Studies* 1 (1999).

Ilona (Andrea Rau) appear. The countess immediately begins to insinuate herself into the couple's world, encouraging Stefan's latent sadism and casting doubts into Valerie's mind. Meanwhile, Stefan appears to be fearful of his yet-unseen mother, who he says is sure to oppose his marriage to Valerie. After several attempts to skirt the issue, he finally calls "Mother" from the hotel—and afterward, humiliated by the phone call, takes out his frustration by beating Valerie viciously with his belt.

That evening, Valerie tries to flee her abusive husband, but the countess intercepts her at the train station and convinces her to stay a while longer. When they return to the hotel, they discover that Ilona has been accidentally killed, following a tryst with Stefan. Valerie turns to the countess for comfort, who welcomes her with open arms—and into her bed. Valerie quickly becomes Ilona's replacement, and the two women kill Stefan and flee in the countess's car, driving into the sunrise. When Valerie crashes the car in her desperate attempt to reach cover before the sun is up, the countess is thrown onto a tree branch and impaled. But as an epilogue reveals, her spirit has been transferred into Valerie's body—indicating that the "countess" has likely passed through a number of bodies in her lifetime—and we see that the story is about to unfold again with a new couple.

Daughters of Darkness mocks the saving grace of heterosexual marriage that marks the conclusion of most lesbian-vampire movies; instead of a fairytale ending, the naïve young bride meets harsh realities as her new husband tries to assert power over her both emotionally and sexually. As a woman and, more so, as a wife, Valerie has no future and little hope. Stefan begins showing signs of an abusive streak from nearly the first scene; as the film unfolds, it becomes clear that the newlyweds married almost on a whim and haven't actually known each other that long. Actor John Karlen remarks in a commentary track on the 2006 Blue Underground release of the film that "even if the countess had not come along, this marriage was doomed ... [Stefan] probably would have murdered this girl."

More importantly, before their marriage is derailed by Stefan's abuse and infidelity, we get a glimpse of the dead end awaiting the couple: Stefan's crushing

realization that the marriage has been a sham from the start, and that he is, and will remain, under the thumb of “Mother.” For as we see when Stefan makes his phone call home to report his marriage to Valerie, “Mother” is actually an older, wealthy homosexual lover, played by well-known Dutch actor Fons Rademakers. During their conversation, Mother chides Stefan for his hasty actions and tells him he's simply being unrealistic. “Whatever in the world would we *do* with her?” he asks mockingly. “When that little Valerie, the day she hears about *us*—oh, I hate to think about that.”

According to director Harry Kümel, the idea to make “Mother” a man instead of Stefan's actual mother came only after he and co-writer Pierre Drouot had come up with the initial treatment for the film; Kümel felt it made things more interesting and gave the film a bit of an “edge.” With this twist, showing that the domineering Stefan is himself thoroughly cowed by another man, we get a glimpse of Stefan's deep conflicts about his relationships with both of his lovers. Kümel, in his commentary on the 2006 DVD release of *Daughters of Darkness*, explains that Stefan realizes in this scene that he is “not able to escape his destiny, which is to be a kept man. [So] he punishes his wife.”³ John Karlen felt that Stefan probably really wanted his hasty marriage to Valerie to work—she would be his way out, his chance to break away.

This twist serves to underscore the centrality of heterosexual marriage to the lesbian-vampire narrative: in addition to the anxieties produced around the wife's attraction to the lesbian vampire (and the feminist freedoms she offers), the husband expresses anxiety around his own sexual identity. Stefan not only needs his wife to stay with him to retain his own sense of masculinity and male supremacy but to keep himself from being homosexual—and not only homosexual but clearly possessed by another man. In this context, when Stefan angrily says to the countess, “I am a man, and she is mine,” he is not only declaring his ownership of Valerie (keeping her out of reach of the harmful seductions of lesbians) but trying desperately to reassure himself that he is, in fact, a heterosexual man.

³ *Daughters of Darkness* DVD commentary, Blue Underground, 2006

Harry Kümel was no stranger to circumventing traditional sexuality and gender presentation; his first film, *Monsieur Hawarden* (1969), told the story of a woman who disguises herself as a gentleman for fifteen years in order to avoid prosecution for the murder of her lover. Still, *Daughters of Darkness* was likely never intended to be *quite* as unusual as it turned out to be. Kümel, frustrated in his attempts to find funding for what would become *Malpertuis* (1973), did what many other directors in similar situations have done—he decided to make a low-budget, commercial horror movie. After coming across an article on Countess Erzsébet Báthory, he sat down with co-writer Pierre Drouot and came up a treatment over the course of three days, bringing Bathory into the twentieth century. Kümel recalls that they found private financiers almost immediately "because it was full of blood and sex."⁴

The fact that *Daughters of Darkness* was financed privately—without government funding—made it highly unusual. At that time, making a film without money from the ministry of culture was unimaginable, though it's highly unlikely that the ministry would have signed off on such a movie; a lack of money also meant a lack of intervention, so many elements remained intact that might otherwise have been strictly censored. The multinational financing of the film brought with it a multinational cast: Danielle Ouimet (Valerie) was a French Canadian actress; Andrea Rau (Ilona) was a German dancer who had also acted in soft-core pornography. Kümel paid little attention to casting—with the notable exception, of course, of Delphine Seyrig. Indeed, Kümel's participation was contingent on her; as "the most intellectual actress of France" (according to Kümel), she would bring an air of sophistication and relevance to the film.

Seyrig shines as the femme-fatale countess, exuding an aristocratic sophistication and aloof charm with hints of a profoundly sadistic nature just barely kept under restraint. Kümel believed that the entire film hinged on her performance, and it's hard to disagree with his assessment. (Alain Renais apparently felt it was the best performance of her career.) Her demeanor is nearly childish at times, beckoning to Ilona with her arms stretched out straight in front of her, grabbing playfully; later, she tells

⁴ Ibid.

Valerie: "Give me your hands, come on, give them to me," as if she were a toddler demanding a favorite toy. She moves almost as if she were floating. And she is always smiling—one of the defining elements of her character. Other critics have noted that Seyrig practically channels Marlene Dietrich, which was Kümel's intent; he chose Dietrich as a model for the countess undoubtedly in part as a tribute to his cinematic idol, Josef von Sternberg, but he has said that he also "chose the most masked kind of person that had been in cinema.... I don't believe in naturalistic cinema ... I like people to be masked ... to be fabricated."⁵

In many ways, *Daughters of Darkness* is a study of this "masked" nature of people, of the secrets and deception of relationships. To this end, Kümel effectively plays with distance and space to create feelings of isolation; in numerous scenes, characters are shown from far away when one would expect a close-up. When Stefan and Valerie first meet the countess, for example, the scene is filmed in a disconcertingly wide shot—we can barely read the expressions on the actors' faces. The vast, empty hotel at times invokes Seyrig's most famous film, *Last Year at Marienbad*—which also centered around a handful of characters in a hotel and played with themes of deception and illusion.

The empty hotel and empty streets of Ostend were due more to a lack of a budget (and thus no extras or other actors) than anything else, but they add significantly to the slightly unreal atmosphere. The exterior shots, as well, are nearly all set at dawn or dusk, creating an unearthly atmosphere of grays and blacks mixing with the deep blues of the ocean. Color is clearly of great importance to Kümel: red, black, and white dominate everything from costumes to lighting. Kümel repeatedly fades to red; red scarves are laid over lamps to drench the entire set in a faded red hue. Kümel notes: "[Red, black, and white] are the colors of the Nazi flag ... the countess [is]... dictatorial, regulating people ... a tyrant of the mind ... I make a reminiscence through those colors."⁶

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

In the end, what are we to make of the countess? Is she, in fact, an evil tyrant, nothing more than the monstrous Bathory of legend who tortured and killed hundreds of girls?⁷ After all, as Stefan says, death follows in her wake. What's more, the speed with which she trades in one companion for another is completely ruthless; not a tear is shed for Ilona, and when they go to dispose of her body, she callously uses her foot to send it rolling down a sand dune toward the beach for Stefan to bury. She is a prime manipulator who manages with just a few words to keep Valerie from getting on her train and instead return with her to the hotel—where she has carefully set the scene to prove Stefan's infidelity and thus the wickedness of men in general. As she tells Valerie (after she recoils from the countess's advances): "[Stefan] dreams of making out of you what every man dreams of making out of every woman—a slave, a thing, an object for pleasure. So you despise me. So I disgust you. Come—I'll show you what men are really made of. Every man. Yours."

While the crimes of the countess are clearly far worse than Stefan's, from Valerie's perspective, life with her is nevertheless far better than a life with Stefan ever could be. While Stefan makes no excuses for his verbal and physical abuse of Valerie, the countess is unfailingly attentive to Valerie's welfare. The morning after their first night together, she asks Valerie, "Does it hurt?" The countess may bite Valerie and feed off her blood, but at least she has the decency to care about whether or not it hurts. (In one scene, the countess was scripted to slap Valerie when she goes against her will; Delphine Seyrig refused, believing it to be out of character. Instead, in the final version, we see the countess appear angry for a brief moment, then smile broadly and gently push aside Valerie's hair.)

Ultimately, what makes *Daughters of Darkness* so interesting is how it turns nearly every element of the lesbian-vampire genre back upon itself to reveal new

⁷ Erzsébet Báthory (1560–1614) was an actual Hungarian countess who was accused, along with several collaborators, of murdering as many as six hundred girls. The truth of the story is disputed to this day, but that hasn't stopped countless writers and filmmakers from exploiting the legend, in particular the notion that she bathed in the girls' blood to preserve her youth. Interestingly, the historical Erzsébet was an educated woman with political power who kept her maiden name and took multiple lovers outside of her marriage.

possibilities and slyly disrupt the viewer's assumptions. Most crucially, it presents the married, heterosexual couple—the bastion of goodness in virtually every other film in the genre—as comically doomed. It is not so much a critique of male dominance and marriage as it is a pulling back of the curtain on these institutions, exposing them as inherently bankrupt and absurd. The countess does not need to wrest control from Stefan in order to win his bride—the point is that he never really "had" her in the first place.

Of course, "the point" is also one that is subject to interpretation by the varied audiences viewing this film. Bonnie Zimmerman suggests that the film takes on its most nuanced meaning when the viewer is both feminist and a lesbian--and when it first hit theaters in the early 1970s, it's important to recall that it provided one of the few positive portrayals of lesbianism on the big screen. Even today, *Daughters of Darkness* is something of an outlier in its complicated depictions of sexuality. It places queerness at the heart of the ostensibly straight couple's struggle for happiness. It offers alternatives to heterosexual marriage and male-dominated relationships. And the epilogue suggests that the lesbian countess and her charms endure throughout time, sustaining the anxiety she creates in the men who cross her path and the allure she holds for women—whether in 1971 or 2012.