

Binging: Excess, Aging, and Identity in the Female Vampire

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In Memory of Ingrid Pitt
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The vampire emphasizes the eternal in us. Through the panacea of its blood it
turns the lead of our toxic flesh into golden matter.
(Del Toro: 2009)

Because of her extreme deviation from the ideal, therefore, the female
vampire was both more fear-inspiring and more desire-provoking than her
male counterpart.
(Spencer, 1992: 206)

One of the major stigmas or social transgressions in the twenty-first century is aging and, in particular, female aging. In a culture that prizes youth and beauty above all else, showing signs of aging, such as having dry and wrinkly skin, is a scenario worse than death itself, making the possessor monstrous and almost “undead.” If, as Jung suggests ‘Myth is society’s dream,’ then its imagined monsters are its nightmares. Within this framework, there is no monster that encapsulates and embodies the dystopian visions of a society obsessed with the perfect feminine form or, as argued by many commentators, the non-feminine form,¹ like the female vampire. Reflecting society’s obsession with youth and the seemingly endless

¹ See Bordo et al. re: masculinisation of female figure.

regimes of diet and cosmetics needed to maintain and/or ensure it, so too does the female vampire require a proscribed routine of care to maintain her appearance of eternal youth and beauty. If these proscriptive processes are not entered into, then the ravages of time and excess threaten to aggressively attack the skin of the transgressor, rendering it wizened, wrinkled and on the verge of petrification. Curiously, the maintenance of the vampress' outward appearance necessitates an intimate relationship with fluids and food² which verges on the dysfunctional, or what is commonly considered an eating disorder. Being typically characterized by extreme bouts of abstinence and consumption,³ this disorder would be identified as binge eating. As such, the vampress embodies not only the monstrous demands of the patriarchal society that imposes the desired forms and shape of female identity but also the monstrousness of transgressing these norms. Consequently it can be seen that the acceptance of the female by the larger community requires acts of social transgression and that, through these acts, it is possible to create spaces of individual identity and agency. This paper then will look at some of the discourses that operate within and around the nature of binge eating in relation to both the society that constructs them but also the subject categorised as being the one that suffers from, or is the victim of, such dietary disorders. Alongside this it will example forms of equivalence between these largely negative configurations and some of the narratives that have evolved, and subsequently encircle, the figure of the female vampire in popular culture. These are often very different to those that are readily applied to the male revenant in the more instantly recognisable representations and interpretations of, for instance, Bram Stoker's, aristocratic Count Dracula and so to

² As the vampire feeds mostly on blood the categories of food and drink are fairly interchangeable as one equates to the other.

³ For the purposes of this paper, the term "consumption" is used in a more general sense of being used and consumed rather than just strictly digested.

illustrate just how, and why, these differences occur I shall conclude with an in-depth discussion of the film *Countess Dracula*.

Eating disorders are a particular point of stigma within contemporary culture, being largely seen as a result of hegemonic oppression. Marlene Boskind-Lodahl interprets these exterior pressures on the female body shape as thus: “Whether the causes of this [aging] are the excesses of smoking, eating, drinking, or even tanning, they result in the breaking of the collective prohibition –looking old a distorted concept of body size, a characteristic of the anorexics described by Bruch⁴ and of the bulimarexics⁵ I have studied, is related to the parental and societal expectations that emphasize physical appearance” (Boskind-Lodahl: 348). Noelle Caskey negotiates a middle ground where a certain level of self-reflection is imminent within such controlled relations with food, and by extension, the body: “[a woman] perceives her body and its appetites as imposing alien necessities against which she rebels, while at the same time experiencing the desires of others towards her as indistinguishable from her own images of desire” (Caskey: 263). This positivist approach is further emphasised by Susan Haworth-Hoeppe in her article, “The Critical Shapes of Body Image,” where her studies have shown:

Food restriction has been named in other studies as a coping response used by women with eating disorders to reassert personal control over their bodies (Gordon, 1990;⁶ Root & Fallon, 1988⁷, 1989⁸; Kearney-

⁴ Hilda Bruch, “Children Who Starve Themselves,” in *The New York Times Magazine* (November 10, 1974), p. 70.

⁵ “Bulimarexics” is her own term for the combined categories of those suffering from anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

⁶ Gordon, R. (1990). *Anorexia and bulimia: Anatomy of a social epidemic*. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell.

⁷ Root, M., & Fallon, P (1988). “The incidence of victimation experiences in a bulimic sample”. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 3, 161-173.

Cooke, 1988⁹) and to increase autonomy (Bell, 1994¹⁰; van Vreckem & Vandereycken, 1994¹¹; Wooley, 1991¹²). (Hoepfner: 229)

Either way, what it does signify is a very special, indeed complex, relationship between ourselves and food – not in just what we eat, as Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach famously said “man is what he eats,”¹³ but also in the way we eat it. As noted by Martha Reineke, in her work on *Abjection, Anorexia, and Medieval Women Mystics*, “an unregulated appetite signified an unregulated society.” (Reineke: 249) As such, the binge eater, rather than the anorexic, poses a much greater risk on society at large, as he/she signifies a loss of control and someone that, if not controlled, might infect the larger society around him/her; the binge eater is simultaneously configured as not only the disease itself and also the carrier of it. That this is the case is seen in the definition of BED, binge eating disorder, by American Psychiatric Association where the criteria for the “illness” include:

(1) eating an amount of food in a two-hour period that is definitely larger than most people would consume in that time period and (2) feeling a lack of control over eating during these episodes. Additional

⁸ Root, M. (1989). “Treating the victimized bulimic”. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 4, 90-100.

⁹ Kearney-Cooke, A. (1988). Group treatment of sexual abuse among women with eating disorders. *Women & Therapy*, 7, 5-21.

¹⁰ Bell, K. (1994). “On the relationship between daughters and mothers with regard to bulimia nervosa”. In B. Dolan and I. Gitzinger (Eds.), *Gender Issues and Eating Disorders* (pp. 21-32). London: Athlone Press.

¹¹ van Vreckem, E., & Vandereycken, W. (1994). “A sexual education programme for women with eating disorders”. In B. Dolan and I. Gitzinger (Eds.), *Gender Issues and Eating Disorders* (pp. 110-116). London: Athlone Press.

¹² Wooley, S. (1991). “Uses of countertransference in the treatment of eating disorders: A gender perspective.” In C. Johnson (Ed.), *Psychodynamic Treatment of Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia* (pp. 245-294). New York: Guilford Press.

¹³ Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach (1804- 1972, a) German philosopher and anthropologist: “Der Mensch ist, was er ißt” or “man ist was man isst” which translates as “man is what he eats”, from an essay entitled “Concerning Spiritualism and Materialism” from 1863. This mirrors an earlier quote by Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755- 1826) who said “Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es”, which translates as “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are”, in his essay “Physiologie du Gout, ou Meditations de Gastronomie Transcendante” from 1826.

indicators include (1) eating much more rapidly than usual, (2) eating until feeling uncomfortably full, (3) eating large amounts of food when not physically hungry, (4) eating alone because of embarrassment over the amount being eaten, and (5) feeling disgusted with oneself, depressed, or very guilty after overeating (Faber, Christenson, de Zwaan, Mitchell: 297).

The majority of these criteria can be viewed as relational judgments in that they are assessed either against what are considered to be societal norms and expectations (as seen in phrases such as “an amount of food...definitely larger than most people”). Simultaneously, there is also a required emotional response because of transgressing these collective expectations, as seen in feelings of “embarrassment”, “disgust”, and “very guilty”. Such bingeing, and particularly female bingeing, then becomes an act of social and self-imposed exclusion, separating the woman who cannot control herself from the collective as a source of danger and pollution.¹⁴

Conversely, in separating the self from society it provides a means of re-integrating the self into a oneness of being that is usually denied in a culture of deferral.¹⁵ “the binge brings about a union between the mind and body. One gives one’s self to the food, to the moment completely. There is a complete loss of control (ego). It is an absolute here-and-now experience, a kind of ecstasy” (Boskind-Lodahl: 352). In this way, it correlates very strongly to the experience of the vampire, as Sarah Sceats notes: “vampires legitimize or at least give expression to what the

¹⁴ Mary Douglas identifies this as a source of social pollution when an action poses a “danger from transgressing the internal lines of the system” *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo*, (New York, Routledge, 1966: p. 124).

¹⁵ See Jacques Derrida *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston, Northwestern Press: 1973).

rational and social exclude. They are portrayed as unable to help themselves, their behavior as inevitable as gravity” (Sceats: 108). The inevitability of a vampire’s nature then also embodies one of the qualities that necessarily exclude it from society, or which are seen to confuse boundaries. Anne McWhir identifies these as the “modern and primitive, civilized and savage...good and evil, clean and unclean, life and death” (McWhir: 31) and is much more so when the vampire is female, effectively further transgressing that which has already transgressed. The multiplying, or doubling, of evil through the very fact of it being perpetrated by a woman is one of “male” laws being broken by a non-male, and as described by Karen Humphreys, can be seen in “figures from Medea to Lady Macbeth who not only break the law of the general social structure by committing their crimes but they also break the law of the patriarchal order that governs that economy” (Humphreys: 747). Even so, the leap from the female binge eater to the female vampire might seem somewhat extreme but through the cinematic representation of the life of Elizabeth Bathory that follows I hope to show this is nowhere near as fantastic as it may seem.

The film *Countess Dracula* was made 1971 and directed by Peter Sasdy. This movie was part of the hugely popular series of vampire movies for Hammer Film Productions and starred Ingrid Pitt who had previously featured as the vampress in *The Vampire Lovers* (Baker: 1970), a largely faithful version of Sheridan Le Fanu’s story, *Carmilla*, from 1872. Here too is a tale of someone, a female vampire, who loves her “food” too much. *Countess Dracula*, however, is a re-telling of the late medieval story of Countess Elizabeth Bathory and tells of an older woman, driven by the demands of her socially-produced desires, who wants to look younger no matter the cost. Here, the body is specifically configured as repository of age, identity, and

social integration, discrete from any mental processes confirming Western culture's continuing Cartesian separation of body and mind. Within this framework, it is only possible through the excessive consumption of the concentrated essence of the body itself, configured as an almost supernatural substance. To stay young, the female vampire must binge on blood.

Strictly speaking, *Countess Dracula* is not a vampire film; the main character Elizabeth, or Erzabeth, Bathory, was a historical figure, born in 1560. She is now mainly remembered for her "specialized recreational" activities. These are described by David Pirie as thus: "Bathory was not simply a murderess, she was a murder factory, As many as six hundred girls over a period of hardly more than fifteen years may have been fed into her voracious recreation chamber" (Pirie: 18). The purported reason for this repeated act was her quest to remain forever youthful, and this was achieved, as noted by Alain Silver and James Ursini, by the "Countess 'milking' them of their blood to daub on her skin to restore its 'translucence'" (Silver and Ursini:97-99). This practice is variously reinterpreted as bathing in the blood of virgins, but the application of blood on the skin was not so macabre then as it seems now, for treatments and cosmetics for leprosy in the early medieval period often involved blood. One author of the period, Velasco de Tharanta, thought "that it would be better if this ointment were made with the blood of a young and healthy person" but Alberto de Bologna disagreed about mixing the two and thought of "some use the fresh blood of children as a palliative, especially for the face"¹⁶ (Demaitre: 272). Even as late as the eighteenth century, such acts were still considered possible, as Davis Biale recounts: "There were even rumours, which led to rioting in France in

¹⁶ In reality, the alleged application of this sort of remedy caused Perrette de Rouen, a practicing physician, to be convicted in Paris in 1408.

1750, that King Louis XV had abducted children in order to cure his leprosy” (Biale: 100). Although configured as a mass murderer, we never see the Countess in the film actually drinking blood, so her categorisation as a vampire might seem a little misplaced; however, there is an accumulation of evidence, not least her binging and social exclusion, as the narrative develops that can see her as nothing else than an inhuman consumer of blood.

Bathory's inherent nature as “undead” is developed within the *mise en scene* of the film. Beginning with the death of her husband, it immediately throws a deathly pallor across the castle within which she lives, with all its colourings being predominately black and grey. The Countess herself is continually seen through a veil as though she has already embarked on the journey to the other side. This is emphasised when the veil is occasionally lifted and we see here dry and wrinkled skin, covered in large warts, and her lips drawn into a rictus that reveals two rows of sharp little teeth. The awakening of her unholy thirst is first seen when she looks at the son of one of her husband's friends who attends the funeral; she thus already is shown to desire what society says she cannot have, a young virile man. It is purely by chance that she discovers the restorative qualities of blood. When a serving girl cuts herself slicing a peach, the blood spurts onto the Countess. As she wipes it off herself, she notices how young her skin has suddenly become. At once, actions that society precludes her from provide her with exactly what society holds most dear and what she desires so much. She has the girl brought to her private chambers and bathes in her blood. This is seen as an almost religious experience on par with a return from the dead. The film shows this by the sudden transformation of the drably dressed figure we saw before, “emerging from behind a screen of variously coloured glass after her bath, golden haired ... and attired in a blue peignoir which reveals a

flesh that is indeed ‘astonishingly white’” (Silver and Ursini: 101). In fact, the amazingly youthful and glowing look of the Countess makes her seem positively angelic. This is a discourse that appeared around medieval mystics and food in the medieval period where blood brought about ecstatic transformations and emotions. As explained by Caroline Walker Bynum, “it was only by bleeding, by being torn and rent, by dying, that God’s body redeemed humanity. To become that body by eating was therefore to bleed and to save—to lift one’s own physicality into suffering and into glory” (Bynum: 251). The linkage between the almost religious experience of binging on blood, if only through its application to the skin, is further described in terms of the sublime by Shiela Lintott who sees eating disorders as an almost spiritual quest, “considering the efficacy of the sublime in the progression of eating disorders will show that much eating-disordered behavior can be understood in terms of a quest for such experiences” (Lintott: 68). The Countess’ religious fervour is seemingly rewarded, as her reborn youth wins her the adoration of the man she so desires. However, this is short lived for the God which once seemingly blessed her then damns her. As the film reaches its climax, at the wedding of Elizabeth and her paramour, Imre Toth, the grace that was once so unexpectedly bestowed upon her is as abruptly taken away. As the priest solemnly intones the wedding vows, signaling the fulfillment of her dreams, like a bolt from above age, returns to her.

The act of marriage here is the achievement of a goal and the completion of her quest, meaning that she would have received the object of her desire. However, this is exactly what the patriarchal system disavows, maintaining authority and dominance by making the objects of its desire forever unobtainable. Bathory, in the film, signals a way of short-circuiting this process. Her excessive acts of transgression use the quest for eternal youth as a means to an end when, in fact,

the ideology of beauty demands that it can only be a means with no end; a holy grail that can be aspired to but never acquired. One scene in the film in particular exemplifies this sense of unobtainability, which is when we see the Countess bathing in blood. Once realizing the positive benefits of blood being applied to her skin, she decides to totally immerse herself in the substance to get the full effect. As we see her applying a blood soaked sponge to her skin she remarkably resembles a newborn child, naked, and smeared in birthing blood. That this blood comes from virgins increases its significance for it transforms the act into one of a virgin birth or the product of an immaculate conception. The religious resonances of this can also be seen in comparison to the writings of the thirteenth-century mystic, Catherine of Siena, where transcendence is achieved through such binge-like behaviour:

So I want you to follow the Magdalene, that lovely woman in love, who never let go of the tree of the most holy cross. No, with perseverance she was bathed in the blood of God's son; she got drunk on it; she so filled her memory and heart and understanding with it. (Catherine of Siena: 2:48)

Elizabeth's behaviour then would seem to take the excesses demanded by religious, or patriarchal, proscription and subvert them to her own ends, enacting not the continual resurrection, or eternal recurrence that can never be satiated but a rebirth of the self that goes beyond this. As noted by Karen Humphreys, when talking of the Countess in Valentine Penrose's work, *La Comtesse sanglante*, "the countess literally ... surpasses her limited existence by bathing in the blood of young girls" (Humphreys: 748). She continues: "Erzs~bet (Elizabeth), on the other hand,

transmogrifies herself into a deity; by making herself a god on the altar of humanity, any crime is a right (as well as a sacrificial rite)" (ibid). This sees her usurping the law of both society and the divine making herself the ultimate authority; not only does she bake the cake but she allows herself to eat it. However self determination constitutes a transgression too far and at the moment of its fulfillment, her marriage becomes the moment of her punishment; the object of desire is once again removed. The penalty for such individual agency is public shame and social exclusion. This is seen in the closing scene where Bathory is awaiting the arrival of the hangman.¹⁷ She now looks older than at any other point in the film, haggard, disheveled, and virtually configured into living human remains. Outside the crowd, entirely made up of women, who chant out "Devil Woman" and "Countess Dracula", identifying not only her social transgression but expulsion from her own sex for daring to take what she wanted for herself rather than accept what was given to her and for subverting the means of oppression into ones of individual expression.

To conclude, I shall begin with a quote by feminist writer and thinker Hélène Cixous:

I found myself in the classic situation of women who, at one time or another, feel that it is not they who have produced culture. . . Culture was there, but it was a barrier forbidding me to enter, whereas of course, from the depths of my body, I had a desire for the objects of culture. I therefore found myself obliged to steal them. (Cixous 1977:485)

¹⁷ She was, in fact, bricked up in her own castle which constituted something more akin to house arrest, as seen by her surviving for a further three years, rather than a macabre means of execution.

This neatly represents the underlying intent of bingeing in terms of the appetites of the female vampire. There is a complete equivalence between the socially transgressive characteristics of both bingeing and stealing that take ideologically inclusive objects and make them the facilitators of individual empowerment through exclusion and, thus, transcending hegemonic discourse. This re-situates the notion of eating disorders in general and binge eating in particular. Whereas commentators such as Kim Chernin see excessive eating as “above all, an illness of self-division and can only be understood through the tragic splitting of body from mind” (1982, 47), bingeing can also be viewed as a reparative action that reunites what society once divided. As earlier observed by Boskind-Lodahl, “One gives one’s self to the food...it is an absolute here-and-now experience, a kind of ecstasy” (Boskind-Lodahl: 352). This quasi-spiritual side to such an experience points not so much to the delusional nature of these acts but to the opportunities that they provide for individual determination and agency. The desires posited by patriarchy as a means of individual and gender-ized restriction become unbound and untenable. As noted by Susan Bordo, “more often than not, however, women are not even permitted, even in private, indulgences so extravagant in scope as the full satisfaction of their hungers” (Bordo: 129). Such satiation indicates the possibility of more than the notion that “the anorectic or bulimic depends on her hunger for her identity” (Lintott: 79) but to a position of excess that allows her a positioning that “surpasses her limited existence” (Humphreys: 748). Bingeing, then, through its excess, allows for a sense of self-ownership, or self-rebirth that hegemony denies. As further noted by Bordo:

The fact is, we are not empowered in this way by our culture; indeed, we are continually being taught to see the body that reflects back to us

in exactly the opposite way as wrong, defective, “a caricature, a swollen shadow, a stupid clown”. (Bordo: 299)

The female vampire then, particularly as seen in the figure of Elizabeth Bathory, offers many more self-determining identity positions than ordinarily offered by going beyond, or transcending, patriarchal proscription. Sarah Sceats observes: “women (vampires), prowling to satisfy their transgressive appetites, offer a revolutionary possibility—an active, penetrative, and indeed vengeful role model” (Sceats: 116). This conflation of the vampire and binge eater not only shows the inevitable social exclusion of both but the ways that transgressive acts can be subverted to offer the possibility of self-determination. The act of rebirth becomes one not of a new Eve but a new Lilith, Adam’s first wife, who was created uniquely and separately from him but, this time, she can re-create herself through possessing her own body and her own identity. She then becomes something beyond, something other than what has been seen before. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari see this category of “becoming-woman” as, “a function of something else: not imitating or assuming the female form” (Deleuze and Guattari: 275) but something transcending previous expectations. Such forms of self determination and creation then become not the description of a journey but the start of one where, as explained by Angela Carter in her book *The Passion of New Eve*, “I thought I might find that most elusive of all chimeras, myself” (Carter: 38).

Filmography:

Countess Dracula, dir. Peter Sasdy, Hammer Film Productions (1971)

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