

**An Analysis of the Representation of Lesbian and Female Sexuality in Hammer  
Production's Karnstein Trilogy.**

In the 1970s, the question of female sexuality and female desire became more pressing and more unavoidable, especially within the horror genre (Hutching, 1993:158). At the same time, the female vampire became predominant in cinema, often starring in films which depicted, for its time, explicit lesbian themes. In the early 1970s, Hammer Film Productions, a British film studio who produced iconic horror films such as *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Fisher, 1957) and *Dracula* (Fisher, 1958), followed in suit of this trend and created three vampire films based on Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) known as the Karnstein Trilogy: *The Vampire Lovers* (Baker, 1970), *Lust for a Vampire* (Sangster, 1971) and *Twins of Evil* (Hough, 1971). *The Vampires Lovers* and *Lust for a Vampire* (and, to a less extent, *Twins of Evil*), revolve around the lesbian vampire Carmilla Karnstein, who is brought back to life from the dead to prey on young virgin women – much like her male counterpart, Dracula. Though, unlike Dracula, Carmilla possess a more overtly sexual (and sexualised) aura about her – both in her looks and in her actions.

Carmilla is an interesting and complex homosexual figure. She possesses the hegemonic ideals of beauty and femininity, mostly through her physical appearance. This, therefore, makes her (hetero) sexually familiar to the heterosexual man as she is placed within the male gaze as an object of desire (Mulvey, 1975). At the same time, she is made to be seen as threatening and as the 'other'; not because she is a vampire but mainly due to her sexually aggressive behaviour, which is the trait within our predominantly patriarchal culture deems 'unfeminine'.

Freud has argued that man often fears woman due to her lack of penis, which, he states, is something that is pointed out and noticed in early childhood (1905). Man is viewed as whole whereas woman is viewed as 'castrated' – something man fears. However, as Susan Lurie points out, woman is not castrated – woman is whole. She states

that man fears woman because she cannot be mutilated (castrated) in a way a man can; woman is physically intact and in full possession of her sexuality (1981: 55). This can be seen through the character of Carmilla, a woman feared for being in full possession of her own sexual desires.

Peter Hutchings describes Carmilla as, "On the one hand, indeed 'vampire-rapist', a destroyer of young innocent women; on the other, a sexual liberator of females trapped within a patriarchal household and definitions of feminine" (1993:160). Even though Hutchings ignores the fact that Carmilla is a liberator of *lesbian* sexuality (ignoring straight women's sexuality), he is correct in acknowledging her capability of liberation through expressing her own sexuality and her own unique femininity within such strict boundaries of patriarchy. That is what man fears from woman. In *Powers of Desire*, Snitow, Stanwell and Thompson wrote "...sex remains oddly taboo, especially for women..." (1984: 9) and Sue Thornham adds to this by stating that within culture "the unruly woman" is a "shameful figure," and that "her power is often simply the power to disrupt" (2012: 159). In short, even though woman is represented as a sexual object for man, it is still seen as taboo for woman to take control of her own sexuality as it a disruption to the patriarchal order. This is heavily portrayed within the Karnstein films, not just for Carmilla but other female characters who dare dabble and explore their own sexual desires. They are represented as 'unruly' and 'promiscuous', the opposite of the obedient innocent female virgin who is often glorified in these films.

Barbara Creed says that the combination of 'lesbian' and 'vampire' is often used since both figures are portrayed in popular culture as sexually aggressive women (1993:59). Even though not all of the female vampires and victims in the Karnstein trilogy are always explicitly lesbian, most of them portray some degree of lesbian or bisexual behaviour. With the slight exception of Carmilla, these women's sexuality is mostly used

either for titillating exploitation or to enforce the negative connotations around the sexually active female. Hart describes lesbians as 'women who act alone': women who have fallen outside of the bounds of the white supremacist ideal and out of the bounds of feminine (1994: 107), thus rendering them no longer desirable, or more specifically no longer 'available' to the heterosexual man. Therefore lesbians, who are often used as a stereotype for sexually aggressive women, should be corrected and punished for their deviance.

In the beginning of *The Vampire Lovers*, Baron Hartog, a vampire hunter avenging his sister, is confronted by a young beautiful blonde woman in a white (albeit, slightly see through) dress – her smile, youth and attire symbolising purity, therefore suggesting virginity- the hegemonic ideal of woman. However, this image is shattered as she expresses her sexual hunger. She approaches the Baron and presses up against him – the camera close-up on her breast as she pushes herself closer, emphasising her sexual desires and undermining her pure and innocent image. Then her left breast touches his crucifix, again in close-up and she jumps back in fear before revealing her vampire teeth, her face distorted and frightening. She is no longer the beautiful young virgin, but a deadly predator-like harlot, thus she is no longer a cog in the production line of patriarchy. She is beheaded for her sexual promiscuousness. Her head rolls onto the floor, her face turned away from the camera - no longer worthy of recognition – as the titles '*The Vampire Lovers*' appears, linking female/vampire lovers with punishment and death.

In the same film, young and innocent virgin girl, Laura, falls victim to the lesbian seductress Carmilla. Carmilla develops a strong relationship with Laura, turning from a close friendship into one of romance. Then the sexual element develops, which is demonstrated through the montage of Laura's nightmares. The camera lingers on Laura's face as she tosses and turns in bed: she writhes around, her mouth slightly ajar – connoting sexual activity. This shot is inter cut and overlapped with an extreme close-up of

Carmilla's eyes which is match cut with eyes of a cat. This suggests Carmilla's sexually predator-like nature, luring Laura into her promiscuous and unruly way of life. This montage ends with a close up of Laura jumping up in bed screaming, believing that a creature was in her room trying to kill her, and thus linking Carmilla's sexual behaviour with death and creating fear and hysteria around female and lesbian sexuality. This is further enforced by the fact that after the nightmare Laura becomes sick and confined to her bedroom, trapped in Carmilla's web, which eventually ends with her death. She is discovered dead with bite marks in her breast – revealing her a victim of Carmilla's aggressive sexuality.

A similar incident happens with Emma, another young and innocent girl who suffers nightmares – the montage of Emma's nightmares is very similar to that of Laura's. However, unlike before, this incident doesn't end in Emma's death. Instead it ends with her being rescued by young man Carl, keeping Carmilla away from her with the use of his crucifix – the symbolism of holiness and purity, as well as a phallic symbol. Thus suggesting that female and lesbian sexuality is 'evil' and needs to be stamped out and corrected through patriarchal values and ideologies. Carmilla pays for her 'unladylike' sexual behaviour with a violent death – a stake through the heart and a beheading.

The link between female/lesbian sexual desire and punishment also occurs in *Lust for a Vampire*. Two girls, at different points in the film, die at the hands of Carmilla; we, as the audience, are positioned as Carmilla, giving us her point of view while the victims breaking the fourth wall by talking to the camera. Both death sequences are very similar: the camera (Carmilla) approaches the girls – both are eager to see the vampire – and they speak and act flirtatiously. Both girls come closer and lean into the camera, letting their faces take up the screen – the focus on their fluttering eye lids and the biting of the second girl's lip, connoting their sexual desire for the vampire. The first girl kisses the vampire

before cutting away to the men, hearing her scream before discovering her dead body. The second girl's face turns from a fluttering flirty smile to one of horror as she is attack/bitten/raped by the lesbian seductress – death as their punishment for giving into their sexual desires.

In *Twins of Evil*, Carmilla only appears briefly leaving the two twins, Frieda and Maria, to the main female roles. The stereotype of whore vs. virgin is a key theme in this film and is represented by the two twins. Maria is “good, kind and virginal” – she is shown as obedient and passive, very much the patriarchal ideal, whereas Frieda is portrayed as 'bad' and 'mischievous' for her desire to disobey her uncle (the patriarch) and explore her wants and desires, shown through her interest in Count Karnstein (who himself is described as “wicked”). Frieda often bullies her sister, calling her “stupid” and “selfish” as she attacks Maria, regardless of the fact Maria is trying to help protect her sister. Frieda is often framed in a low-angle shot when with Maria, whereas Maria is shot in high-angle by the camera. This enforces the idea of Frieda being threatening and a danger to poor, innocent virgin Maria, who is always portrayed as the passive victim. Though Maria never falls victim to her vampire twin; she is almost killed because of her when Frieda swaps clothes with Maria to fool the village into thinking she is the pure and innocent one, letting Maria take the fall for her. Though, Frieda's disguise is found out when she attempts to seduce Anton, the teacher that Maria falls in love with. She undresses in front of him, revealing her breasts and makes her sexual intentions obvious as she says “Anton, I've always wanted you”. As she embraces Anton, he sees that she doesn't have a reflection in the mirror. On the realisation that she is a vampire, the camera cuts to a distorted close-up image of Frieda's snarl, fangs and all. She then lunges on him, the camera placed below her and shaking connoting danger and portraying as a sexual predator, very different from her meek sister. The behavioural difference is also enforced by the film poster's tag line:

“One uses her beauty for love, One uses her lure for blood!”. This suggests that Maria is “beautiful” and “pure” since all she wants out of life is a man, whereas Frieda's appearance and manner is described as “lure” - a word that carries negative connotations and is often linked with 'danger' and 'entrapment'. Frieda is violently beheaded by her uncle near the end of the film – her punishment for her promiscuousness - whereas Maria is saved and gets Anton, no longer bothered about her dead vampire sister.

The punishment and death of these women heavily connote the patriarchal values of what a 'lady' should act like. This undermines female and lesbian sexuality, which is represented through the vampire figure, by attempting to convince the spectator that it is simply 'bad' behaviour and not completely natural. Creed says that “the female vampire is monstrous... precisely because she does threaten to undermine the formal and highly symbolic relations of men and women, essential to the continuation of patriarchal society.” (1993: 61). Thus, the lesbian vampire's existence, as said before, is a disruption to what patriarchy calls the norm due to her sexual orientation and also her exploration of her own sexual desires which could potentially cause other women (including straight/pure/innocent/virgin) to explore and experience their own. Another element of these films which pushes aside female sexual desire is the voyeuristic portrayals of women, especially those who partake in homosexual experiences. Not only does the titillation and exploitation of these vampires undermine female sexuality, it also makes these lesbian characters easier for the straight male spectator to consume as they can easily blend into the heterosexual object of desire. Thus distracting the male from Freud's idea of 'female castration', and Lurie's idea of the fear of female sexuality, by overtly fetishising the female body and taking ownership of it by making her the passive object and the spectator the active member.

As said previously, Carmilla's physical appearance and manner conforms to what patriarchal society deems 'feminine' and 'beautiful'. (maybe find a source for this?)

Throughout the trilogy she is busty, curvy and blonde, which is very different from the original novella, where Carmilla is described as “slender” and “wonderfully graceful”. Carmilla, in lesbian terms, would be known as a lipstick or femme lesbian. Femme lesbians, according to Clare Whatling in her book *Fantatising Lesbians in Films*, are “rendered invisible as the heterosexually identified women”, thus becoming a passive object of heterosexual (and lesbian) desire (1997:60).

In *The Vampire Lovers*, when the audience is first introduced to Carmilla, who is played by 70s screen beauty Ingrid Pitt, she is dressed in a very low-cut red dress – symbolising both blood and desire. Shots of her are inter cut with several shots of men looking off-screen into the distance at her, all shifting and stirring at the sight of her. This sequence already suggests her heterosexual attractiveness as well as implanting her as the object of the voyeuristic gaze. This is further enhanced by the fact she does not even speak within this scene, suggesting that her beauty and sex appeal are the only important aspects of her. Also, throughout the film she wears elaborate and colourful dresses, singling her out from the other women while portraying her as exotic, especially with her thick accent.

One obvious scene where the camera has become a straight male voyeur, is the bedroom scene between Carmilla and Emma, which completely jolts the narrative due to it being unnecessary and almost useless to the plot. The scene starts off with a long shot of Emma looking at dresses in the background and Carmilla nude in a bath in the foreground, her breast conveniently placed above the water. Her wet body is placed in the centre of the screen, and stays there even when the camera pans then tracks to follow Emma. The camera moves upwards slightly away from her body, only to then allow room for her to get out of the bath in order for her pubic region and buttocks to be the centre of the screen,

this shot lasting far longer than most in the film. Carmilla wraps the towel around her waist and sits down at a dressing table. Her back is turned to the camera but her breast clearly in view in the mirror, which takes up more of the shot and is on the left hand side, thus the first thing the audience will notice. She turns around, her actual breast still hidden but the reflection very much in view. Mirrors are used through *The Vampire Lovers* and almost always used to frame a woman's body, inviting the spectator to leer. In some instances, for example when Carmilla looks out her bedroom window at Laura's household to see the mysterious dark man, the edges of the mirror cut off the woman's head thus negating her as a person and rendering her nothing more than a fragmented body. Also, the use of the mirror's reflection is a very voyeuristic trait as it is looking without looking and, even more so, looking without the woman's knowledge. Therefore making her an object of desire.

In *Lust for a Vampire*, Carmilla (Yutte Stensgaard) is also subjected to the male gaze – along with almost every female within the film with the exception of the headmistress (who is deemed 'too old' to be desirable!). The film takes place in a secret all-girls school - a typical location of male fantasy – which is introduced to the male protagonist, and the audience, by a large group of young women in see-through dresses with perky nipples, draped over the front steps, gazing at the camera playfully. Throughout the film there are several scenes of the school girls in their bedrooms walking around topless, their breasts filling up most of the screen and even some pairs framed without their owners' heads. These scenes often have very little to do with the narrative and almost feel like an afterthought. At one point, one of the girls says (while topless), “have you notice that he's always standing around, watching us?” making it clear to the spectator that all these girls are worth is what Mulvey calls their “looked-at-ness” (1975). This is further enhanced by the lesbian make-out scene in the lake, where two girls are shown in full frontal nudity. One of the girls says that “old Giles” is always “creeping around” and “trying to catch us with no clothes on”; most of the girls' dialogue is either sexual or in regards to

their appearance and always with a man in mind as the 'looker'. Furthermore, the 'dark' and 'mysterious' figure following Carmilla, in both *The Vampire Lovers* and *Lust for a Vampire*, holds power over her. He is always watching – he holds the gaze, therefore he is the active and she is the passive, held under his control.

In *Twins of Evil*, Carmilla is only present briefly and is shown to be having sex with Count Karnstein. The camera lingers, in close-up, on her thigh, ankle and breast before cutting to a close-up of her hand rubbing a candle up and down suggestively. Her short appearance only to turn Count Karnstein into a vampire and to have sex with him – the later taking up more of the screen time.

The twins are heavily objectified, always wearing low cut tops and bending over to reveal their enormous breasts. It must also be noted that the twins are played by Playboy models Madelaine and Mary Collinson, two girls who had already be noted for their “sexiness” before they had even starred in *Twins Of Evil*, thus creating sexual anticipation in a male audience and negating their characters within the narrative. Also, by using identical twins there is the element of exoticness, much like Ingrid Pitt's Carmilla, which is pointed out throughout the film by Count Karnstein who says, “twins? Now that would be *different!*”

There is only one instance in *Twins of Evil* where lesbian activity is present, though, unlike the other films, it includes a male participant and is far more of a “display” for the male audience. The Count offers Gertha to Freida, telling her to punish Gertha for being so jealous. The camera is in long shot, showing all three characters, as Freida strokes Gertha's face before fondling and biting her breast. This takes place on the left, the more dominant side of the screen, and the Count leers at them from the right, getting pleasure from Gertha's pain as well as fulfilling his sexual voyeuristic needs. Andrea Weiss states that, “The typical vampire and her victim are both visually coded heterosexual and feminine, even though the narrative sets them up to be lovers... they flirt with men and

dress (and undress) to appeal to male desire.” (1992:106). So, through the fact that the Count gets sexual pleasure from witnessing this lesbian act the film invites the male audience to watch the sexual spectacle as the lesbians are used to cater to the male sexual desire.

Though some will argue that for a lesbian audience this objectification of women would be sexually fulfilling, Paula Graham points out that for a lesbian audience it is far more complicated than that:

The lesbian spectator generally resists identification with the feminine object and may slide into the phallic position in the classical scopic relay... This evokes a familiar lesbian strategy for reciprocal female subjectivity: 'phallicised' female sexual subject desires self-as-other female reciprocally... The lesbian resists passive objectification by adopting the 'phallic' agency, yet desires a woman as a sexual object. This paradox structures conflicts around lesbian sexual identity” (Graham. 1994:201)

In short, the lesbian spectator has no one to truly identify with, even within films with lesbian characters, as women are often nothing more than sexual objects. Thus lesbians can only really identify and be put in the position of the male protagonist, which conflicts with their gender and identity as a woman. This is also very much the case for straight women as well; where are they supposed to be positioned and who are they to identify with? As a woman/lesbian with her own sexual hunger, she is punished and stamped out for the sake of the continuation of the patriarchy's needs and values. Furthermore, just for being a woman, she is turned into a passive object of display for the voyeur. Though, the lesbian vampire explores female sexuality and looks to understand strong same-sex friendships/relationships she is still undermined by hegemonic values that are portrayed within these films. As Weiss says, “the generic lesbian vampire both expresses and

represses sexuality” (1992:84).

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