Book Review: Evil Sisters by Bram Dijkstra

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Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality and the Cult of Manhood. Bram Dijkstra. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. 444 pp.

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Vampires are in, these days. Indeed, the huge popularity of Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* movie and sitcom, and the weekend cult gatherings of American adolescents dressed in black, eyes ringed with kohl, sporting virtual fangs fashioned by hometown dentists, might suggest that fascination with these creatures is at an all time high. But Bram Dijkstra's Evil Sisters makes clear—in what is best described as a social history of the idea, ideology, and iconography of the vampire—that the current appeal of this creature of the night cannot rival its hold on the imagination during the early decades of this century. It was then, Dijkstra argues, that the image of the vampire gained widespread currency in western Europe and America because it telescoped complex ideas and anxieties concerning sexuality, gender, race, and class.

Dijkstra identifies the silent film *A Fool There Was*, starring Theda Bara, as the source of the image of the "vamp" as the erotic, exotic (i.e., non-white, lower-class, or "primitive") woman who uses her body to lure white men away from their duty to wife, family, and race, causing their financial, reproductive, and literal destruction (indeed, "Theda Bara" is an anagram of "Arab Death"). He ties this image, in its multiple manifestations, to a wide range of scientific ideas, especially those of evolutionary science, but also of medicine, anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, and even etymology. While many of these scientific ideas justifying race and gender inequality will be familiar to anthropologists, their connection to a dizzying array of both popular and "high" cultural representations may not. Indeed, Dijkstra is at his most interesting when identifying the scientific, ideological underpinnings of such popular films as *Birth of a Nation*, *The Ten Commandments*, and the Fu Manchu series, such pulp-fiction serials as *Tarzan* and *Amazing Stories*, and such writers as Kipling, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner. His exposure of how "extravagant scientific speculations" and "poorly considered scientific theorems" can invade and give form to our popular imaginings long after they have been officially discredited, serves as a reminder of the importance of taking popular culture seriously, especially in light of the frequent misuse to which anthropological ideas are put.

Yet in his zeal to document the pervasiveness of vampire imagery at the turn of the century, Dijkstra sometimes stretches belief a bit thin. In an attempt to link images of the predatory female to ideas from etymology, for example, Dijkstra offers a rather farfetched description of Kurtz's African mistress in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. She is a "praying mantis woman ... with stalklike ornaments, an annelid's body rings along her extremities, and the glittering surfaces of a horned coleopteron's casings" (pp. 127–128). And in his attempts to stress the importance for our current understanding of that time period, he often falls prey to hyperbole, as when he claims that the "antifeminine" content of Conrad's work has been largely overlooked (p. 148). This ignores not only

numerous early feminist analyses of *Heart of Darkness*, which sometimes focused too heavily on its gender dimensions, but also more recent and balanced critiques that are careful to link the ideologies of colonialism, race, and gender at work in the text.

Moreover, Dijkstra's choice not to cite his sources in the text reduces its credibility and value as a scholarly work. And his contention that "our social reality is a product of the dreams and fears we hold in common" (p.7) will, most certainly, strike many anthropologists as simplistic and naive. But if taken as a popular account, many anthropologists will find this a fascinating analysis of a time period whose scientific and popular images still hold sway for many in contemporary American culture.

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