

# The Beatrice Interview: Bram Dijkstra (1996)

Ron Hogan

In *Idols of Perversity*, UC-San Diego professor Bram Dijkstra explored “fantasies of feminine evil in fin de siècle” Europe. The sequel to that book, *Evil Sisters*, brings his study of “the threat of female sexuality and the cult of manhood” into the twentieth century. Prof. Dijkstra details the connections between anti-feminine imagery and racist ideologies in both high and low culture, drawing upon films, pulp novels, and popularizations of science as well as literary classics and paintings to support his thesis. The conclusions are, to say the least, unsettling.

**Let’s talk about how *Evil Sisters* builds upon your previous book, which dealt with fin de siècle culture, and takes it into the twentieth century.**

It’s a direct extension, really. In the earlier book, I dealt with the academic art of the late nineteenth century, what was considered high art before the arrival of modernism, and I showed how an increasingly anti-feminine concept of women became popular after the introduction of theories of evolution, and created what I called an iconography of misogyny. That iconography became the basis for a lot of the twentieth century’s popular culture, and towards the end of the earlier book, I showed how anti-feminine thought began to link up with anti-Semitic thought. People would claim, for example, that Jews are inferior because they are somehow effeminate, because it was easier to hate Jews than it was to hate women, who were always around and biologically necessary. So instead of gynocide, we launched a genocide.

When the book came out, some critics felt that I had gone too far with that statement, that it was somehow extreme or stretching the truth. So I decided to write this book and take these viewpoints into the twentieth century, to show how these ideas from high culture and science become the foundation of anti-Semitic theory, especially in Nazi Germany.

**That’s a very important point—this is a book about popular culture, but the ideas in pulp novels and silent films are more often than not just popularizations of what the leading minds of the period were saying.**

That is something that we really have to focus on more than we have in the past. In the universities, there’s a striking fear of low culture or pop culture, a sense that high culture could be contaminated by low culture and lose some of its real value. But what is very clear to me from working on these books is that it’s high culture that creates the context for pop culture, and that they have a much more symbiotic relationship.

Many cultural studies departments today are dealing with pop culture, treating it as somehow more representative of a culture’s general attitudes. But if you accept the connection between high and low culture, that opens up some very dramatic realizations, namely that what we consider high culture may not be as high in its thinking as we thought it was. That’s what I deal with people such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner. They’re three of the brightest stars of twentieth century high literature, but if we look at their work closely, we can see that they express all the same attitudes found in pop culture novels, and often their work is more dangerous, or perhaps insinuating, because they’re better writers and can ‘cover their tracks’ a little better, to make these ideas seem more complicated.

And high cultural critics have often been willing to act as apologists for these moments, by saying, “Well, they’re just accurately portraying the times,” or, “He’s tapping into universal, archetypal images here.” But that’s just obfuscation.

One of the big movements in high culture, starting in the 1940s and ’50s, was New Criticism, which made it a point not to study a work in its historical context because that would take away from its value as art. This artistic focus became predominant in post-WWII culture and has created an environment in which high culture becomes privileged from historical analysis. But if you do start to look at that historical context, you can see how even literary writers were responding to the immediate circumstances and attitudes of their time. You cannot take artists out of their culture; in fact, dealing with the artist within his culture makes our appreciation of the work richer, but in a more complex way.

In other words, you have to start a dialogue with writers like Fitzgerald and Hemingway on the level of ideology as well as literary merit. What they are saying is not the expression of universal archetypes, but a reflection of very specific political movements of the time, and if that’s the case, then the way they portray humanity is ideological rather than universal, and that means that you have to start developing opinions about the validity of what they’re saying. Most people don’t want to do that, because they want to read a ‘great work of literature’ without the burden of criticizing the author’s point of view.

**“Oh, *The Sun Also Rises* is such a wonderful book, the dialogue’s so crisp...” as opposed to “Jesus, this is an awfully anti-Semitic, misogynist piece of work.”**

That’s exactly it. And what you find is that in so-called modernist criticism, you find a lot of emphasis on what is wonderful in certain works and absolutely none on what is outrageous. D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* is one of the most outrageously racist, evil films ever created. The story is absolutely carried by hatred, but because it’s surrounded with stylistic innovations developed by others but used more effectively here, we talk about the film by discussing his camerawork and closeups and so on, liberating ourselves from the responsibility of having an opinion about the film’s content.

One of the intentions of *Evil Sisters* was to show how essential it is for us to go back into history and understand what the popular understanding of science was at a given time. The scientists themselves may have had a very complex understanding of certain concepts, but in trying to communicate that understanding to a large public, they used metaphors and simplifications that come across to the public as, “Women are praying mantises, they’re black widow spiders...they steal the male’s vital essence.” The dangers in history are on the level of popular culture as well as high culture; both of them are important only as they exist within the general culture.

**In the period that *Evil Sisters* covers, you spend a lot of time on film, a medium which is able to convey ideology very effectively and very subtly.**

That works just as much today as it worked in 1915. We don't always recognize it in older films simply because we don't have the historical background to make connections that were obvious to viewers when the film was new, but we still get some vague sense of the message they're trying to convey. The deemphasis of historical knowledge of art in our culture is a convenient ideological structure that makes it easy to ignore the manipulativeness of these works. By not knowing history, most of us find ourselves having to relive cultural misrepresentations all over again. It's only by going back into history, showing how various cultural elements—economic, social, scientific and so on—all link together and interact that we can understand what the cultural images that survive really mean.

So-called universal patterns are not universal, they are structures created for specific historical contexts. In the early twentieth century, that historical context included the justification of imperialism, which further included the fear of socialist tendencies or any form of collectivist organizing or action. It also included the fear of the feminine. That fear has existed throughout history; what I focus on is the cultural mechanisms by which it was channeled into the propagation of a very specific ideology.

**In the last chapter, you point out how our ignorance of this history has led us to treat the Nazi culture as an aberration, to say “We’re not really like this.” You’re saying that Hitler was able to rise to power precisely because these ideas were so pervasive.**

What you find in books like *Mein Kampf* isn't groundbreaking original thought. Hitler popularized ideas that were swirling around throughout Western Europe and the United States. He was a scavenger, picking up ideas that served his own manipulative purposes, and in doing that, he picked up as much from American race theorists as he did from German race theorists. He knew very well the power of propaganda; he knew how to take ideas that people already believed and make them more easily identifiable in dualistic structures. What he did was distill existing racism and use it for a political end.

So in the European theater of World War II, you have a clash between what are basically two racist societies, and when one of them, the United States, defeats the other, it then turns around and applies the same imagery to demonize its other enemies, the communists and socialists. But one of the things that 'saved' the United States from following the Nazi path was the important influence of new immigrants—precisely those 'aliens' whom the 'Aryan Americans' feared. The immigrants, with their sense of their community and humane relationships, created a counterbalance within our society. It's precisely America's diversity, or multiculturalism if you will, that kept this nation from being "all of a kind" as Nazi Germany was.

**And it's that multiculturalism that keeps us from going that way today, even though these racist, anti-feminine attitudes still exist.**

The scary thing is to see how little they've changed, especially with the return of the millennial fears we're seeing now. Look at the end of the nineteenth century, and the publication of *Dracula*; Dracula is clearly an alien, an Eastern European, described

by Stoker as effeminate and Semitic, who contaminates modern civilization. Today the aliens have been moved to outer space, but the themes of films like *Species* are the same: an alien takes on the guise of a beautiful woman to destroy the manhood of the nation, deplete a society's male energy.

**It's very convenient to take these tropes and simply apply to them to a new enemy, a new "Other."**

And once you have the metaphors in place, it doesn't take that big of a leap from the fantasy of killing the monster to the fantasy of killing the monster who happens to be a Jew or an Asian to actually doing it. We have to be very careful with our enthusiasm for using metaphors. Metaphor is in itself a neutral device, but one which can be used for positive or negative ends, for genocide as well as poetry.

**At the end of the book you say that we're surrounded by fetishized gender imagery: "To fantasize about warlocks and witches, about vampires and werewolves, about Mars, Venus, and the caveman within, is to perpetuate the fantasies of a world eager for war and to remain complicit in the fetishization of others as evil, as alien, as inferior, and to do so is to see difference as a disease..." I agree with you, but it's difficult to snap out of those fantasies..**

It's more difficult if we don't have a knowledge of our history. If we know that these things we feel within ourselves—and we all have some vestiges of them within us—can be traced through clear historical indications, if we understand how they start, how they develop, and for what reasons, we can refuse to be completely subject to them. Individualism is a reaction to the elements of indoctrination that you've already undergone.

**I know that there's a book waiting to be written which points out how guys like John Gray and Robert Bly are perpetuating this imagery. Are you thinking about writing that book?**

I would say that I've already written it with *Evil Sisters*, because by reading it, you see how they're recycling stuff that has gone before. They play on the culturally created subconscious of the audiences they have. As we come into the world, we have several potentialities for development, but culture closes in on us from the moment we're born and starts indoctrinating us with certain assumptions. If one takes on the assumptions of the twentieth century—which is pretty much what will happen—then it's very easy, and much more lucrative, for others to simply exploit those assumptions than to suggest that it's time to change the assumptions.

I have grave reservations about books and authors like the ones you've mentioned; I don't particularly want to get into a debate about it because there are more interesting and important things to write about, but we have to realize that many of these authors, such as Robert Bly and Clarissa Pinkola Estes (the author of *Women Who Run With the Wolves*) are Jungians. And as I point out in the book, Jung's part of the problem; he organizes and normalizes a lot of prejudice into what he calls archetypal structures. **So where is your continuing research taking you?**

I'm going to continue with this material, bring it into the 1940s and 1950s, and the dramatic reoccurrences you find of these attitudes, particularly in the visual arts and high culture in general. I'm exploring the link between high culture and modernism with the antihumanist philosophies of the twentieth century. Much of the post-WWII high modernism in America and the rest of the western world is antihumanist, hostile to notions of community, of any form of humanism. It becomes about the lack of meaning, the need to create our own significance out of nothing. The highest level of significance, that of the elite, becomes abstraction. So the concept of the evolutionary elite arises again, deliberately excluding those who 'haven't evolved.'

## The Ted K Archive

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