



Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Culture

Bram Dijkstra

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Bram Dijkstra begins this analysis with the 1915 silent film *A Fool There Was*, in which Theda Bara first embodied our century's vision of the Vamp--kohl-eyed and predatory, seducing respectable men and destroying them with her voracious appetite. Dijkstra makes clear that this wasn't just a vision conjured up by a misogynistic artist but was a point of view shared by turn-of-the-century biologists, gynecologists, psychologists, geneticists, and sociologists, all of whom promoted distorted ideas of gender, sex, and race. Dijkstra goes on to show how these distortions are reflected in painting; in popular and literary fiction, from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to the novels of Conrad, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner; and in such femmes fatales of the cinema as Louise Brooks, Garbo, and Dietrich.

Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Culture Details

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Lisa says

Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Culture by Bram Dijkstra (1998)

Greta says

I'm giving this book 2 reviews-one general and one for my film friends:

General review:

What do Freud, Jung, Ezra Pound, Joseph Conrad, Bram Stoker, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Saxe-Rohmer, Durkheim, Mencken, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Hitler have in common? They were up on the latest pseudoscience of the early part of the 20th century on women, sex, and race. The sociobiology field at the time was characterized by extremist social Darwinism. My feeling, though the author does not explicitly state this, is that once scientists and intellectuals accepted scientific Darwinism and had to abandon their belief that God created everything in its present state, they had to find a "scientific" rather than theological excuse for their sexist and racist attitudes. At the time women were becoming more assertive and immigration and colonialism meant that whites were in closer contact with other races, so it became an intellectual imperative for paranoid white men to find a rationalization for everyone else's inferiority. The author doesn't go into the origins of the theories, but provides copious examples from the literature of notable scientists, psychologists, sexologists, as well as pulp fiction and some films.

The basic theory is that white men are the pinnacle of evolution, but are in constant danger of degenerating into a more primitive state. The basis of their intellectual, physical and economic strength is the precious bodily fluids of blood and, especially semen. In fact, male brains are made of re-absorbed seminal fluids. Any expenditure of semen weakens them so they have to spend wisely, otherwise they will grow weak and degenerate and lose all their money, as well as their stern and continent character. The lower orders of primitive humans (debased poor whites as well as all nonwhites and Jews) are sex maniacs, and so will never evolve because they are not continent. All women are vampires of a sort, with hungry wombs that crave men's seminal emissions that they need for nourishment and reproduction. The more highly evolved the human, the more sexual dimorphism there is, with men far superior to the women. The most highly evolved white women are still uncivilized, but when properly socialized are completely weak, stupid, and self-effacing, so man only give in to them as much as is necessary (taking care not to be weakened by women's compassionate and socialist tendencies). But a bad woman (and the lower orders are more likely to be bad) lures men into destruction by absorbing his nourishing seminal emissions and gaining strength at his expense (and giving birth to effeminate boys). In fact, the more primitive the human, the stronger and more socially equal the women are and the more effeminate the men. Despite that, somehow the primitive men are better endowed, the highly-evolved status of white men coming at their expense of their potency and genital size (these theories obviously have some internal inconsistencies). The authors of the time made frequent use of lurid descriptions of the mating habits of spiders and mantises.

Dijkstra finds evidence of the spread of these theories and their implications all over the culture of the time and beyond, with scientific misogyny eliding easily with scientific racism, antisemitism and eugenics and

forming an fertile field for Naziism and genocide. He begins with and comes back repeatedly to the Theda Bara film *A Fool There Was*, as well as the novelization. He ties together threads of vamps, vampires, the cultural horror of Africa, monkey glands, eugenics, fear of communism and socialism, and the erotization of violence. He has so many examples that he does rather overstate his case, leaving the reader rather exhausted. He does go on to an excessive degree about the "vagina dentata" and "African womb." But he has quite amusing deconstruction of Freud's "Dora" case. He does make it clear that these theories would have been well known to the educated classes and anyone with intellectual pretensions, and shows how these ideas filtered down into popular culture, spread by pulp fiction and films, and continue, zombi-like, to infiltrate the culture long after the "scientific" theories themselves were discredited and forgotten. Therefore, he denies the Jungian theories that these express some universal archetypes rather than specific cultural ideologies. He's very wary of any modern essentialist arguments (women are from Venus, etc.), and the modern fascination with vampires, and is rather horrified at women embracing the vamp figure and her accoutrements as empowering.

A very interesting book, and worthwhile for those interested in the history of sexism and racism, the Vamp figure, or cultural history. I'm giving it 4 instead of 5 stars just for too many examples (not all of which fit) and too much hyperbole, as well as his coming down too hard on modern women trying to have a little fun with the stereotype. But his basic observations are sound, and i applaud his excavation of the assumptions behind some of our most enduring cultural imagery.

Film history review

I finally read Bram Dijkstra's *Evil Sisters*. It's not film history book, but a book on the sociobiological ideas current among the intellectuals of the turn of the last century. In short, the basic theory is that women (even nice ones) have reproduction as their only drive and therefore drain men of their essential seminal fluids that men need to build their economic fortunes as well as their body and mind (men's brains being made out of semen, it's not clear what women's brains are made of).

He only deals in detail with *A Fool There Was* (which he takes VERY seriously) and *Birth of a Nation* until the last part of the book when he goes into other Griffith films, *Cabiria*, *The Ten Commandments*, *The Sheik*, *Metropolis*, *Pandora's Box* and *Nosferatu* (though in the latter two he's more concerned with their antisemitism). He also covers the novel *Sanctuary* (on which *The Story of Temple Drake* was based) and its sequel (!) *Requiem for a Nun*. He delves into the novelization of the stage play of *A Fool There Was*, which has some juicy tidbits from the novelist ion of the original play of *A Fool There Was*, including explicit backstory on their social classes (the vamp is the daughter a degenerate aristocrat and a degraded Breton peasant). He's not a film historian, he's from a literary and art historical background, and sees how silent film was influence by academic painting and is aware of its visual power. His observation of how the imagery and narrative of these influential silents reflect these "scientific" theories are quite interesting, if occasionally overwrought. He spends a lot of time on Griffith, but i'm not sure he fits in with this mode of thinking--i think his mindset belongs to an earlier generation. But it is a fascinating (if ultimately exhausting) read on how sexism and racism were rationalized by social Darwinism and some really nutty theories, and would be useful for someone interested in the Vamp phenomenon, or general cultural/intellectual history of the early to mid 20th century.

There's a nice interview with Dijkstra on the book here:

<http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/di...>

Drake says

I came across this book while doing research for my honors thesis. Read it. Fascinating, eye-opening, occasionally horrifying. It resonated with me particularly as a science/medical geek with an interest in vampire literature. He draws together vampires and germ theory, works in Third Reich images of masculinity and their fear of the subversive feminine, and adds a smattering of early Hollywood. Really really worth reading. Trust me, you will find it relevant.

Jenn says

Read this and despair over the fact that basically nothing has changed in the last century and a half. The arguments of the racists, misogynists, idealogues, and genocidal tyrants that Dijkstra discusses in this book are still being used today. A fascinating look at the history behind what we consider "common sense" and "just obvious" today.

Amber says

This book is a very interesting study of early twentieth century attitudes towards women and female sexuality. It is a real eye opener, as some of the attitudes (at the very least) reverberate today. I would say it is a must read for people interested in women's studies and the history of social sciences, such as sociology.

Jayalalita devi dasi says

But it's true. I have sharp pincers and a deadly appetite. Suck, suck, slurrrp, crunch. That's what romance sounds like.
