

*What does the word vampire make you think of?*

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Catalogue essay

Diego Ramirez, *Signs of the Undead*, MARS Gallery 13 July – 3 August 2019

To reach her cell, to cross the threshold of her new and final home, to enter the bricked-up place to settle into a life of devotion lit only by the dull sky from the north, the medieval anchoress first needed to crawl through her own grave. This ritual, carried out while the bishop recited the office of the dead, took her through a channel dug in the earth floor to her living tomb: a small anchorhold on the side of a church. Symbolically, this also carried her from mortal life to a state of living death. Like a vampire, she existed outside of both natural and human laws.

Was the cell her coffin, too? Or did she escape that – the entrapment of the body, neuron cells and stem cells and lacrimal gland cells and the insulated goblet cell (for mucus secretion) and the islet cells of the pancreas, these not discovered until six centuries after the time of Julian of Norwich, England's most famous anchoress – in shedding her old life?

Blood cells.

I visit the NGV with my friend C, who knows more about this topic, though we're equally susceptible to the pull of withdrawal. She wants to see the relics in the decorative art department. We stop in front of a tortoiseshell-veneered crucifix in a narrow vitrine: the cross has little windows cut into the back for the small and yellowed bones of saints. C is thrilled – if a little discomfited – by the presence of devotional objects in a secular institution. Of the body, saint's bones are Real and Symbolic in the Lacanian sense, and the crossover of these two registers produces a particular kind of anguish known as phallic jouissance. The fears associated with *having* the phallus – anxiety over failure and impotence, but also the anticlimax of success – seem to me to be especially vampiric. And at the place where the saint's bones, or the vampire's fangs, find their meaning – martyrdom, brutal hunger – there is always a symptom.

What does the vampire suffer from? All states of proximity, too-closeness. This is repellent to the colonisers of the British Empire and all lovers of borders for whom garlic is also too strong.

The vampire is both undead and unalive.

Resurrected, but relieved not to be saved.

Dancing under lights which are never – bless the noble gas – bright enough for you to be sure who's one of them.

Nonplussed that centuries and other formulae do not serve to separate time. Julian of Norwich and Count Dracula shared goblet cells and a squint.

My sister, born with long and pointed incisors, wants to find a dentist to file them down.

Vampire slips into blood – the symbol, not the slapstick image, but that would make for a good film – and blood slips into teeth, bloodletting, letting bodies, the impulse to bite, devour, desire. A cliché, yet we still understand barely anything of this procession.

There is a threshold here too. Vampires rising from their coffins to greet a new night. An invitation to revel with our new friends, if we're willing to believe two things can exist at the same time.

Julie Taymor's *Titus* and Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* were released only two years apart, in 1999 and 2001. In Denis's film, Coré is a vampire whose doctor-husband locks her inside the house every day to stop her from killing; from feeding. While fucking him, she bites out the tongue of a man who breaks into her house. There are no vampires in *Titus*, which is based on Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, but there is a scene with a cut-out tongue. Lavinia, daughter of Titus, has been raped by Chiron and Demetrius in an act of vengeance on behalf of their mother, Tamora, Queen of the Goths. To prevent her from speaking their names, Chiron and Demetrius, they cut out Lavinia's tongue; so that she cannot write their names, Chiron and Demetrius, the brothers cut off her hands and replace them with twigs.

Names, prayers, the moment the curtain opens, sharing a meal (with the one who's bitten). The abstraction of ritual is that it only connects to itself.

The female vampire is kin to the femme fatale: both devour men. Films and film critics have played this to death, but what do we understand of the process of revenge, of substituting one tongue for another? Of love bites? Before fangs, our prosthetic teeth were long like rats'.