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VAMPIRISM: A SECULAR, VISCERAL RELIGION OF
PARADOXICAL AESTHETICS

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Abstract: Vampire stories and folklores have originated from a range of sources; however, it is rather certain that the repulsive but attractive vampiric monster images in present popular culture are primarily derived from Anne Rice's novel *Interview with the Vampire*. That being said, it was around the end of the eighteenth century that vampires first invaded the popular literary world, with literary vampires growing noticeably more powerful and perpetual than any of their monstrous predecessors in the years since the publication of John Polidori's successful short story *The Vampyre in 1819* (Punter and Byron 2004, 268). Due to associated aesthetic transformations, vampirism itself has become increasingly popular, to the extent that it now commands some followers who even worship vampiric rituals and lifestyles in spite of there being no solid, physical evidence of actual vampires, but rather only literary and imaginary examples of the creatures. In order to grasp how this fascination with vampires has turned into a quasi-religious phenomenon and ideology, a proper investigation of vampiric mechanisms and aesthetics should be empirical in nature. Utilizing *Interview with the Vampire* as an example due to its clearly substantial influence on current vampire imagery, this article examines how the paradoxical interchange between aversion and attraction plays its role in the visceral religion of the vampire-immersed world.

Key words: vampire, religion, aesthetics, disgust, paradox, blood

1. Vampire Religion: A Brief Introduction to the Transformation of Popular Vampirism

Vampire stories and folklores emanate from discursive areas; however, it is rather certain that the repulsive but attractive vampiric monster images in the present popular culture are primarily derived from Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*. Nearly at the end of the Eightieth century, vampires invaded the popular literary world. Since John Polidori's successful *The Vampyre* in 1819, literary vampires grow more powerful and perpetual than any other monstrous predecessors (Punter and Byron 2004, 268).

Although their power and sophistication has generally grown along with their popularity, in early Gothic texts, vampires are depicted as primitive, beastly, and savage rather than as superior to or even comparable to humans, as creatures whose ancient shadowy residences and reclusive comportments distance themselves from humanity's sphere. The primary aesthetic difference emerges in a comparison between Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), in which the aesthetic transformation of vampire characters from the mostly disgusting to the delightfully repulsive appears (Dyer 2005, 83). In *Dracula*, the vampire trait of predatory barbarism induces emotions "both thrilling and repulsive" (Stoker 2007, 40). For instance, one of the female vampires "actually licked her lips like an animal ... lapp[ing] the white sharp teeth" and making a "churning sound of her tongue" (Stoker 2007, 40). After feeding, Dracula is described as a sluggish and sickening bloodsucking parasite with "swollen flesh," and "it seemed as if the whole awful creature [the Count] were simply gorged with blood. He lay like a filthy leech, exhausted with his repletion. I shuddered as I bent over to touch him, and every sense in me revolted at the contact" (Stoker 2007, 52).

Before making further observations regarding the changes defining the evolution of vampire imagery in modern vampire literature, I would like to point out that this article examines, in particular, how the paradoxical interplay between aversion and attraction plays its role in the visceral religion of the vampire-immersed world, using *Interview with the Vampire* as an example due to its clearly substantial influence on current vampire imagery. Such an inspection of the interplay and dynamics between aversion and attraction can help us glimpse the functions of the repulsive aesthetics of monstrosity in the context of such a peculiar religion, a religion that "consists of people who have committed themselves to an ideology" and "participate in rituals" in such a way that their belief system may present "as an aesthetic choice" (Laderman and León 2003, 279, 280). Moreover, such "aesthetics holds a significant, often magical place of significance" (Perlmutter 1999, 7) for these adherents, with Anne Rice's vampire novels having "an undeniable influence on the

culture and aesthetics of the vampire community” (Possamai 2012, 156). This “aesthetics” does not focus merely on physical appearance and strength. In addition, similar to other religions, the followers of vampirism may interpret or comprehend the belief system in various ways, with some focusing more on superficial aspects and others engaging with it in more complex ways. Vampirism, in a manner akin to other religions, promises the possibility of rising above mortality, attracting people with visions of a destiny that is beyond time and death, one that is unbounded by secular rules and superior to that experienced by mere humans. Nonetheless, depending on individuals’ spectra of comprehension, this destiny, that is, the achieving of immortality in vampirism, does not necessarily constitute the end of one’s search for a *raison d’être*. Rather, Anne Rice’s seminal works and the relevant vampire phenomena imply an everlasting struggle, a struggle that goes beyond mere physical façades and is related to the metaphysical aspects of aesthetics. According to Kant, aesthetics is not defined by a fixed, established concepts of beauty but a process of interaction, “play,” negotiation between understanding (the determinate faculty) and imagination (indeterminate faculty) (Kant 2007, 49). In vampirism, the individual may embody a struggle between his mortal, physical existence and one that is beyond such limitations, experiencing a back-and-forth battle between his original human identity and the new vampiric one. This struggle generates a paradoxical lure via the creation of an atmosphere of agonizing complexity that can only be understood by eternal beings, an ache that can only be grasped by those bound to an everlasting, beautiful existence. To sum up, this article examines the aesthetics in Anne Rice’s milestone novel *Interview* because, in “vampire religion” (Laderman and León 2003, 281), “aesthetics holds a significant, often magical place of significance” (Perlmutter 1999, 7), and because Rice’s works wield “an undeniable influence on the culture and aesthetics of the vampire community” (Possamai 2012, 156). Since the superficial and the struggle-related aspects of vampiric aesthetics both play roles in the “undead” phenomenon worshipped by many (young people in particular), the following sections will attempt to inspect the mechanisms and transformations of and between these two types of aspects.

2. Aesthetic Transformations and the Popularization of Vampire Religion

The vampirism, at least with respect to its promotion through various literary trends, can be divided into distinct periods. In the earliest period, the relevant literature rarely involved depictions of young and beautiful or otherwise attractive figures; rather, such stories primarily focused on evoking a sense of mystery and terror. Like some early beliefs in the ascetic discipline, this early form of vampirism thus involved the

misery and suffering evoked by some horrific obstacle or hardship, but hardly involved any elements of fun, pleasure, or beauty.

In works of fiction produce prior to the 1970s, undead creatures are generally not portrayed as having emotional complexity; rather, they are simply recognized or stereotyped as malevolent and revolting monsters who slaughter and feed on humans without remorse or any contemplative struggle against their own unnatural presence. However, this typical portrayal is fundamentally altered by Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, which ventures into an unfamiliar realm by providing an image of the world through a vampire's eyes (D'Ammassa 2006, 289). Colin McGinn specifies that the pre-modern image of vampires was obnoxious and hideous due to "their association with blood" and the stereotypical sketch of them as "clammy, cold, pale, and coffin-occupying" presences, which in turn caused them to be associated with mindless and emotionless reptiles or worms carrying infectious disease that "rots the body from the extremities to the core, hands and feet first." This combination of uncleanness with a human-like appearance "seems particularly nasty, not just medically, but aesthetically and emotionally" (McGinn 2011, 15).

Margaret Carter concurs with observations regarding the aesthetic transformation of the feeling aroused by vampire characters, but she constructs a more balanced view regarding the textures of fictional vampires, which is that it is not entirely accurate to say that, prior to 1970, vampire fictions never depicted the arguably positive advantages enjoyed by such immortal creatures (Carter 1997, 27). Victorian novels do, for example, portray vampires as desirable and mesmerizing to some extent, but in so doing, they also strongly imply that they represent or embody the concept of evilness or vileness, an implication that signifies that their charm or their seemingly sympathetic narratives simply function as adornments or side effects, not the true core of the texts. As such, any doom or punishments inflicted upon those Victorian vampires hardly arouse any pity in readers, and even in those cases where readers sympathize with or like vampires to some degree, the reasons for those feelings are not related to their vampirism but to their denial of it. Unlike these earlier texts, however, post-Anne Rice vampire fiction elaborates on the advantages and aesthetics of vampire existence, depicting the creatures not merely as immoral or instinctual animals that live without care and guilt but as contemplative beings who epiphanize the artistic complicity of the world overlooked by human eyes, who struggle with their existential anxieties and unattainable loves on an eternal basis, or who explore the gift/curse ambiguity of their vampiric abilities (Carter 1997, 27).

Interview effectively reveals the supremacy of vampires, with Lestat leading an indulgent life of pleasure, while even for Louis, his narration of his ordeal of eternal damnation notwithstanding, vampirism does offer certain advantages, such as an ability to reflect on the world from a

perspective that is beyond that of humans, not to mention his everlasting beauty and luxurious lifestyle. Moreover, the charm of these vampires is not merely a matter of their physical appearances; rather, it also results from the wisdom and insights gained over many human lifespans, including insights into the lives of others, through their aesthetic contemplation of the world. Also associated with queer charisma, Freeland points out that the “homoeerotic nature of these desires is not a matter of being attracted to physical beauty . . . but to wisdom, spiritual characteristics, power, knowledge, attitudes” (Freeland 2000, 157), his observation supported by Louis’s seeking enlightenment from Armand, the eldest vampire, which will be discussed later. The charms of vampiric wisdom are also perceived in, as Ingebreetsen notes of Anne Rice’s Lestat,

„many of his meditations on the failure of religious belief, [which] become, for Louis, meditations on aesthetic first principles rather than problems of metaphysical agency.” (Ingebreetsen 1996, 95)

In *Dracula*, vampiric immortality is considered by Van Helsing and Jonathan Harker to be a curse rather than a gift, something that effectively requires the Count to live in a state of captivity, instead of granting him the freedom that one might suppose would come from his shape-shifting abilities and superhuman strength (Rowen 2008, 242). *Dracula* falls into “the abyss of human impotentiality [which] is viewed by the inability or unwillingness of the human subject to act” (Polizzi, Draper, and Anderson 2014, 243), “trapped in some of its most dark and dreary corners” (Rowen 2008, 242). Such representations of *Dracula* decrease the level of fascination readers might otherwise have with the vampire’s life, which “undermines any idea of transcendence.” If the undead represent a different lifestyle, then unlike Louis’s in *Interview*, *Dracula*’s “suggests a disabled and dysfunctional human one” which does not disclose “an escape route via the vampire” (Rowen 2008, 242). Christina Olin-Scheller elaborates on the perspectives toward vampiric aesthetics among followers of vampirism, indicating that these followers recognize the attractiveness of vampire appearances and how “real” they are to them. Olin-Scheller likewise points out the “constant transaction” between the vampire religion and its followers (Olin-Scheller 2011, 170), which is an elucidation of vampire magnetism involving looks and effects more than looks.

3. Vampire Aesthetics: The Resemblances between Vampires and Humans

The resemblances between humans and more modern, humanized vampires can influence people to see vampires not just as distant,

alienated, and disgusting monsters with whom they can feel no sympathy, but rather, such resemblances can also reveal the connection between humans and vampires, a connection which can induce feelings of sympathy and even, somewhat disturbingly, the sense that humans themselves contain some of the vampires' monstrous characteristics. Thus, a human may be more able to grasp the struggles and pain of those immortals' different perceptions, their thirst and their hunger. The disgust may be enhanced but not biasedly based on the established concepts and instinctual repulsiveness in the first sight, rather, the unsettling newfound self-knowledge and self-deception, which discloses that the distinction between monsters and humans is arbitrary, blurry, or a matter of degree. Moreover, upon encountering human-like vampires, readers may not only be disgusted by them, but disgusted with them, that is, sympathetic and even empathetic toward these vampires, more likely to attempt to imagine the vampires' thirst, angst, and sorrow.

In *Interview*, the human-like struggles and weaknesses of the humanized vampires are portrayed in their characterization. The traditional literary figure of the monster is thus "humanized":

„Ever since Anne Rice made the protagonist of her 1976 novel *Interview with the Vampire* deserving of reader sympathy writers of vampire fiction have felt compelled to humanize their monsters. Some do so by portraying the vampire as a tragic victim of circumstance, others by showing that vampire behavior is no less predatory than many types of human conduct.” (Shafer 1996, 149)

In contrast to Louis, the vampire Lestat's aesthetics are excessive, stylish, and sensual, but not individual:

„The narrator Louis states of his mentor, “Lestat thought the best color for vampires at all times was black, possibly the only aesthetic principle he steadfastly maintained, but he wasn't opposed to anything that smacked of style and excess.” Lestat enacts the persona of the dandy, but does so not through aesthetic principle, intellectual intention or response to social context but rather through sheer sensual indulgence. Lestat drains dandyism of its cultural import, reduces it to an abstract process of consumption and display. Lestat's straightforward sensual indulgence in fashion contrasts with the Romantic individualism of Louis and Claudia: once they reach Europe, they explicitly reject shared dress codes or a group identity.” (Spooner 2004, 173)

Lestat's "sheer sensual indulgence," his superficial aesthetics, demonstrate his shallowness, which is the shallow pleasure of the senses, not that deeper pleasure of struggling, contemplative aesthetic play. This aesthetics of savagery is esteemed in the vampire world, in which Lestat elaborates his philosophy regarding the meaninglessness of the world, the beauty of nihilistic wildness, and the barbaric "aesthetic truths" he recognizes as "the only ones of value" (Clements 2011, 41). Consistent with this unsettling aesthetic outlook, Frederick Burwick also points out that "vampire aesthetics concerns works in which the terror is so stark that the effort to sustain 'aesthetic distance' or to achieve 'disinterestedness' is effectively forestalled" (Burwick 2015, 340).

Vampire aesthetics is about a form of "constant transaction," the continuous interplay between the imagination and understanding that is related to the anxious pleasure of uncertainty, an appealing eternal exchange in which the lasting appearance is derived from the forever exchange with the young lives of others. More and more, the vampires in *Interview* are portrayed as resembling humans, such as via their secular beauty and "fashion consciousness" and the Gothic "frosty marble" colorless coldness of the "Gothic mansion" which is "filled with decadent individuals drinking blood from long wine glasses and smoking cigarettes in extravagant holders" (Kirkland 2013, 95). Hannah Priest connects the vampires' "inhuman beauty" and the monstrosity of their style, which is "statuesque," "devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful," (Jones 2013, 42) with the popular dressing codes of fictional vampires, which are not completely based on determinate concepts; otherwise, it will defy its trendy nature and never vary, though it certainly keeps parts recognizable. The concepts of vampires and their outfits can grow and transform but can still be recognized because a certain degree of indeterminacy allows for some change even as certain vampiric "trademarks" remain, such as eternal youth, blood thirst, superhuman strength, and so forth.

4. Vampire Aesthetics: Appearances and More

In addition to their association with disgust, these new vampires repel spectators via their murderous tricks, especially their practice of employing their appearances to attract humans with familiar aspects of human appeal, including smooth youthful looks and mature sophisticated talk (Forry 2006, 247), behaviors which could enhance the degree of disgust they elicit by showing how they recall and abuse the memory of their human past without sentimentality. Unlike zombies or Frankenstein's monster, vampires look like beautiful young humans, and yet with no true human attachments, they exploit their human pasts, pushing their charms to the limit to create an attractive but lethal weapon, predatory behavior which is repulsive not merely because vampires exterminate humans but also because they take advantage of

their own human memories and shells to devour their former kind. Tigers sometimes feed on people, but this is more horrifying than disgusting; in contrast, the quasi-cannibalism of vampires' consumption of human blood is more repulsive than frightening. At the same time, the disgust aroused by vampires can be more than just repulsive:

„The disgusting exerts its demonic pull, even as it thrusts us away. We feel conflicted, confused, and disturbed. The vampire embodies this kind of ambivalence perfectly: the magnetically attractive corpse, the romantic sucker of blood, with his morbidly sepulchral beauty. There is, after all, something exciting about the disgusting, something beyond the humdrum: the disgusting is stirring, vital. Disgust sticks in the memory and vivifies the senses, even when—especially when—it is deemed most repellent. Disgust is not boring. It has a kind of negative glamour. And the human psyche is drawn to the interesting and exceptional—the charged object, with its magical potency. We are stunned at our capacity to be convulsed by the disgusting object; we marvel at its strange power.” (McGinn 2011, 48)

On the subject of how disgust is related to “sublime detachment,” indifferent to mortal affects, David Willbern elaborates:

„Sublime *detachment* is one goal of the vampire self; *delirium* is another. Detachment removes the vampire from the realm of human feeling, and provides a super-human perspective on mortality. “Vampires are killers,” Lestat instructs Louis, as they prepare to feed on a fresh young victim, “predators, whose all-seeing eyes were meant to give them detachment.” Later, the vampire Armand speaks of “angelic detachment.” This sublime indifference to human suffering elevates the vampire to an ethic beyond good or evil, and offers a philosophical satisfaction, as an agent of cosmic order. Delirium offers another kind of ecstatic separation from the human, through abandonment to the senses. As Armand instructs Louis: “Let the flesh instruct the mind.” Like drunkenness, delirium blurs personal agency.” (Willbern 2013, 73)

5. The Disadvantages of Vampirism

Although the vampires appear to be boundless, they control and are controlled by their “desirable space” for the consumption of lives, manifesting a repulsive no-way-out-ness and repetitiveness. Vampires live in a repetitive hell, in which the forever cycle of events keeps happening, drinking and getting hungry, never aging, never growing, a form of being that is a perpetual status quo, a static existence. Their lives go to nowhere; rather, they stay forever the same, focused on constant feeding. Although it appears that vampires are boundless, they are actually bounded by themselves, even more bounded than humans, immobilized by their immortality, neither ascending nor descending (Lestat and Armand sensing neither heaven nor hell), dominated by their eternal thirst for blood, completely lacking the specter of death, “a fulcrum that, paradoxically, puts life into action” (Piatti-Farnell 2014, 60). They continue to relive similar scenarios, similar patterns. This no-way-out-ness can disturb people due to its limits, its narrowness, its lack of space and visible exits. Vampires can stay somewhere in a physical sense without really *being* there; they exist as mere shells and suits, as empty vessels lacking true life.

In *Interview*, Claudia’s relationship with Louis becomes increasingly complicated over time, as she gradually grows out of a childish mentality in which she simply loves Louis as a father. Besides the revulsion provoked by this complex incestuous intimacy, Claudia’s unusual experience also evokes disgust because “she is doomed to remain a woman trapped in the body of a child,” a fate which Louis, her love, is largely responsible for (Magistrale 2005, 47). This everlasting immaturity and “immobility is, though conceivable, wholly unsatisfactory” (Inwood 2000, 67). Claudia can never gauge the various potentialities of her beauty, aesthetically “set[ting] in motion the tendentially immobile structures” (Vattimo 2000, 193).

The immortality of vampires reminds people that they are dying gradually; some loathe such a reminder. In this way, deathlessness itself can disturb and disgust people by making them feel uncomfortable about themselves. Such immortality, such everlasting beauty, upsets and unsettles humans precisely because they do not have the same privilege. Vampires can live forever without social commitments. Humans may also notice that they themselves crave such freedom, which may disconcert them further.

The mindlessness of walking corpses, vampires, and humans is revealed in *Interview*, with this mindlessness being related to repulsion and everyday banality. The vampire cities are spaces of dreams and imagination:

„Hurricanes, floods, fevers, the plague-and the damp of the Louisiana climate itself worked tirelessly on every hewn plank or stone facade, so that New Orleans seemed at all times like a dream in the imagination of her striving populace, a dream held intact at every second by a tenacious, though unconscious, collective will. But Paris, Paris was a universe whole and entire unto herself, hollowed and fashioned by history.” (Rice 1997, 202)

6. Flawed but Tempting Vampirism

After “the boy,” the otherwise unnamed character who interviews Louis, still chooses to become a vampire, Louis is disgusted because he assumes that the boy does not see vampires’ aversive and irreversible monstrosity. However, it is actually Louis who, too engrossed by the unceasing recollections of his grief and suffering, fails to see that it is only through his vampirism that he has the paradoxical superior ability to recognize his own inferiority. That is, it is precisely the power that repels Louis that enables him to perceive its repulsiveness. The boy’s choice reminds Louis that he continues to exist, even though such an existence repels him.

The vampires’ various charms, such as their youthful strength and appearance, their splendid surfaces, have a powerful effect on humans. For the vampires themselves, however, taking Armand’s opinions for instance, the beautiful, which is more akin to the dynamic, is most observable in those, including Louis, who struggle with their own ugliness and self-disgust. His damnation benefits him by bestowing a monstrous beauty, his agony reflecting the painful struggle of change in the world.

The disgust Louis feels toward himself cannot be grasped by the interviewer, the boy, who only notices and is enchanted by the power and the beauty of such a supernatural existence, charmed by its potentiality, the “adventure like [he’ll] never know in [his] whole life,” about “things that millions of us won’t ever taste or come to understand,” the “power to see and feel and live forever” (Rice 1997, 335). The boy is fascinated merely by the surface and the power of existing as a vampire, not by its internal contradictory struggles, a fascination that indicates the blindness of young people’s worship.

Pertinent to blind fascination and attraction, the alluring monsters in *Interview*

„transformed vampirism into a sexual aesthetic not without homo-social/sexual overtones. And it is noteworthy that, since the 2000s, some eighty-five vampire films have been released (including series such as *Underworld* and *Twilight Saga*), a remarkable

resurgence of the generic type on an international scale, indicating a renewed fascination in the concept of blood-lust and a fearful apprehension of the exchange of bodily fluids.” (Hayward 2013, 205)

Sexuality is not neglected in the study of the aesthetics in *Interview*, whose powers can initially trigger and eventually repel, or do both simultaneously, driven by voluptuous attraction and aversion, the fusion of the fluid of life, blood, flowing to generate forces, this exchange the dangle between tensions of erotic and survival instincts, complicated by interwoven hatred and passion, these chaotic extremities inseparable but immiscible in the text, contesting and connecting, akin to the aesthetic play of the monstrous sublime, engendering disturbing pleasure. Pleasurable but also disturbing, even disgusting; as Wisker notes,

„Rice explores the potential . . . in her work insofar as she refuse binary divisions, and enables us to understand both the terror and disgust and the endless beautiful possibilities the vampire represent. Her vampires are not easily categorizable as good/bad or demonic/angelic.” (Wisker 2005, 228).

Robert Latham further explicates the peculiar magnetism of vampires, their consumption of youth in the popular culture, as being related to the “swanky-pop aesthetic,” “the trend-setting fashion layouts, the (homo)erotic frankness,” not merely about their “powers, but their assets—jewelry, furniture, lavish houses in glamorous cities” (Latham 2002, 111-2). The erogenous implications and images include perspectives within the aesthetics of vampires. Tanya Pikula, for instance, indicates that “*Dracula*’s obsessive focus on vampires’ ‘red lips,’ ‘scarlet lips,’ ‘lips . . . crimson with fresh blood,’ ‘lovely, blood-stained mouth,’ ‘opened red lips,’ ‘full lips,’ and ‘parted red lips’ connects it with the imagery typical of erotic texts” (Pikula 2012, 296).

7. Vampire Aesthetic Complex: Paradoxically Aversive and Attractive Forces

Interview does not completely exclude the elements of disgust, be they varied, aestheticized, or associated:

„Recent vampires of popular culture are trending more to the sexy and attractive . . . I don’t think this new vampire genre undermines the basic idea of the disgusting vampire, however, because the vampire is still associated with disgust in the form of corpses and blood. The creators are working

more with ambivalence than outright unqualified revulsion, but the latter is still there in the background.” (McGinn 2011, 15)

The stereotypes concerning revulsion remain in the background, in the very concepts related to that which is being perceived. Although on the surface, the spectacle does not quite look disgusting, aversion is still embedded within it, in the darkness, in people’s fantasy associations, imaginations, and dream residuals. Voices and opinions behind the beholden still call, from concealed notions related to the objects, explicitly and implicitly, functioning in various ways.

Attracted by those weird but powerful forces, those strange and alluring, not dull or boring, powers, audiences can fall into the embrace of such forces, those primal and primitive powers, which are raw, rude, and even repulsive, but can nonetheless strongly grasp people’s attention. After stripping away the judgmental obsession with appearance and purposes, the rest is force, the flow of energy, neither good nor evil, a spectacle with a powerful ability to capture viewers, whether by primitive or sophisticated means. Such force can be transformative and transferable, able to exist without form, flexible and penetrative, potentially magnetizing spectators to the extent of revulsion, while still capable of being irresistible. Its trait of transformation can change its appearance and usage to suit any desire or purpose. Disgust serves as a forceful means of repelling and attracting audiences. To power to revolt and entice viewers is a demonstration of force, in which disgust resembles energy, the flow of water, a force capable of cutting through stone and generating electric power. The atmosphere and the disposition that disrupt the status quo and stimulate diverse feelings comprise the core captivating attributes of the Gothic, in which disgust is the mood that appears to be a substantially alluring but relatively less investigated constituent. Spratford thus remarks that the ambiance of such unsettlement “gives a voice to our fears, delivering the dark emotions of panic, chaos, destruction, aversion, and disgust,” which paradoxically fabricates nauseating but “uncompromisingly intriguing” impacts at the same time (Spratford 2012, 18). Unlike conservative expectations of soothing arts, these “difficult” works are steered with a “negative aesthetic aim,” akin to those of classical tragedies, to engender perturbing spectacles, not to induce Aristotelean catharsis but to “evok[e] fear, terror, disgust, and other associated emotions” (Freeland 2000, 5).

Anne Rice’s *Interview*, according to Wisker, is narrated in language that does not arouse mere strong sensations such as dread and aversion, but rather that, distinct from the language of earlier works of fiction used to evoke images of unnatural monsters and their ugliness, portrays the vampires in several ways that provoke a sense of attraction bordering on disgust, including erotic representations in which the sensually sexual acts as a spur and the tensions between vampires and humans are

underscored via stimulating descriptions of those forever beauties with licentious drives (Wisker 2005, 64). In contrast to the Count in *Dracula*, Louis the vampire in *Interview* appears “beautiful rather than monstrous” (Clements 2011, 36), a creature whose beauty not only emanates from his physical form but also from his complex internal conflict and reflective struggle as he constantly experiences guilt and indeterminate anxiety often overlooked by his vampire peers, a struggle which results in a lively flow of force full of uncertain possibilities, meeting the conditions of Kantian aesthetic play. The play between contesting faculties generates a process of interaction, conflicting components interacting with each other, struggling, fighting, and combining, which can result in disturbance and unexpected pleasure, a way of conversation and negotiation. In this process of interplay, these opponents attempt to negate or eliminate each other, but never completely do so. In judgment of taste, pleasure is generated through such interplay, through the pulling and pushing, the ongoing back and forth. The application, the enforcement, of abilities, of the faculties, this employment enables the capabilities of spectators to be activated and to function, to play and interplay. The process is a process of combination, but yet is not finalized in combination, as the various forces keep combining and separating, dancing while fighting in ongoing interactions between determinate and indeterminate elements, between the conceptual and imaginal.

The disgust stirred by modern Gothic monsters is not simply a paralyzing stimulant but a sophisticated mood whose piercing extremity is dwindled via a certain form of “makeover,” in which their charisma and magnetism are portrayed and accentuated, differentiating them from most evil villains in the fictions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; their peculiarity and eccentricity remain, but the yearning for flesh and blood or other murderous behaviors become tragic “flaws” or necessary evils with “sympathetic” stances, the “monster makeover” (Bailey 2012, 44). The perversity and the disgusting ingredients of Gothic monsters, for instance, the murderousness of vampires, are increasingly moderated or garnished with appealing revaluations of life and vitality, in which the blood drinking is re-interpreted as a “blood exchange” and a “life-giving activity,” one which provides an atypical opportunity of undergoing rebirth and re-establishing a sense of belonging, liveliness, and a link to life itself with less concentration on the abhorrent process than the embrace of care, involvement, and aliveness re-experienced via vampiric death façade and threshold (Wisker 2005, 230).

Although vampires, the Gothic representative monsters, have been aestheticized in *Interview* compared to their predecessors in earlier vampire stories, various elements of disgust can still be observed in them, complicating the mixture of pain and pleasure, making the vampires and their angst repulsive but enchanting. The two immortal predators of humans, Louis and Lestat, are representative of their own respective

modes of coping with their peculiar existence, self-disgust and disgust. Disgusted by Louis's stubborn angst and social changefulness, the immortal Lestat is immobile and static in *Interview*, teaching him nothing but survival skills. Louis constantly struggles, fighting with his vampiric needs and human angst, disgusted by his incoherent existence and values, not "curing" the painful angst and guilt in order to keep this revoking but splendid play continuing, an odd hybridity of beastliness and humanity suiting the odd world of mutability, aesthetically playing with and within such a space, a "free" outsider crossing conflicting moods and realms.

Aversion to vampires can be surpassed, for the characters and the readers, by the desire or curiosity to do or see something. In interesting cases, the disgust itself can be tolerated in order to perceive things that please the spectators more than they repel them. They can suppress their revulsion or temporarily ignore it. Thus, a craving for the compelling may outshine the disgust, yielding situations in which viewers seem to be able to enjoy their own revulsion.

The Gothic can signify the "primitive" and "mythic" subdued by "neoclassicism and the Enlightenment," in which the notorious Gothic monsters, vampires, implicate the return of the repressed "mythic primitivism," simultaneously "a positive and a negative," (Picart 2006, 1) a demonstration of the conflicting aversive pleasure, the monstrous sublime.

8. Conclusion

The paradox of loss, the notice of the familiar, and even "angst," evaded or swiftly "remedied" by most vampires, is re-lived by the vampire Louis, repulsively and painfully, an anxious path to incessantly unsettle and remind himself of his guilt, monstrosity, and struggles, even as he still owns the potentialities that have supposedly been exploited after being vampirized, the "resoluteness" not to dissolve "angst" (Heidegger 1962, 103, 297). Louis pushes himself to an unknown territory in which vampiric thirst and human guilt coexist and compete, tasting the distaste, bearing the almost unbearable, oxymoronically aestheticized by repulsively monstrous ugliness, in which an existence is sustained by the very factors that can terminate the existence, indicating a vampire religion that is both popular and peculiar, with either misunderstanding or immersion making it alluring in various ways, whether visual, visceral, secular, spiritual, painful, pleasurable, repulsive, or enchanting, which can involve simple, blind worship while also not lacking the complicity and potentiality of furthering contemplation. Such peculiarity can be approached via "aesthetics," a peculiar approach to non-cognitive "knowledge." These paradoxical Gothic aesthetics provide an unsettling way to "structure a formal inquiry into the *raison d'être* behind their inception and creation," (Browning and Picart 2009, xxi) via disturbing spectacles and struggles,

the potentialities of existence demonstrated, an atypical way to see human possibilities through negative extremities, indicating that the dynamics of the paradoxical interchange between aversion and attraction plays a significant role in this visceral religion of the vampire-immersed world.

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