

Vampirism

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“Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.”

Of the many colorful concepts and metaphors Marx used to articulate as vividly as possible the monstrous nature of capitalism, the vampire has remained one of the most frequently cited, especially as this stubbornly undead figure grew increasingly dominant in 20th-century popular culture. While a seemingly endless torrent of films, plays, novels, comic books, TV series, and video games fueled the vampire’s ubiquitous presence in pop culture, in the academic world an unrelenting series of monographs, edited collections, special journal issues, and conferences has testified to this particular horror trope’s resilience, and more particularly to the public’s ongoing interest in defining its social, cultural, and economic symbolism.

Perhaps it’s no coincidence that the vampire has remained so deeply embedded in capitalist narratives. Even to this day, it remains difficult to imagine a single figure that more perfectly encapsulates the most basic contradiction of our imagined relationship to capital. From early stage versions of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* via movie stars like Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee all the way up to more recent vampire heart-throbs like Robert Pattinson and Alexander Skarsgård, the vampire

represents a thoroughly decadent, depraved, and immoral parasite who is nevertheless thoroughly irresistible to middle-class audiences with their eternal dreams of upward social mobility. So even if Mark Fisher was certainly more accurate when he compared capitalism’s true nature to the disgusting alien in *The Thing* (1982), constantly mutating while absorbing everything it touches, the guilty attraction we almost inevitably feel for the vampire better captures our fundamental ambivalence about the workings of capital. With capitalism, as with vampires, our awareness of the mortal danger it poses doesn’t exactly make us better equipped to resist its tempting call.

The way in which these fantasies are informed and defined by questions of class becomes all the more obvious when we consider the vampire alongside its dialectical counterpart: the zombie. While both are supernatural beings caught in a perpetual state of “living death,” the vampire is traditionally connected to the most obvious signifiers of wealth, aristocracy, and individualism. The zombie, on the other hand, uncannily articulates modern fears of an uneducated, mob-like urban proletariat. The tension between these two archetypal horror tropes of the modern age illustrates vividly how our shared fantasies and fears are over-determined by more mundane and material questions of class and labor. Clearly, our guilty but unshakeable dream is to be invited some day to join the vampires’ privileged members-only club, while our nightmare is that we will be absorbed by the lower-class zombies’ monstrous horde. Or, to put it more bluntly: while nobody in their right mind would kiss a zombie, most of us would gladly fuck a vampire.

Beside the ham-fisted obviousness of this allegorical representation of imagined class identities, the vampire/zombie dialectic also illustrates another key weakness in capitalist narrative culture: its insistent focus on individualism. Originally a quite solitary being passing his time in exotic and remote castles, the 21st-century vampire has tended to be at least somewhat more sociable. In the massively popular *Twilight* franchise, for instance, vampires are even portrayed as functional members of a loyal and loving family group. Nevertheless, the vampire remains grounded in its basic form as an exceptional and identifiable *individual*, with consistent human traits and a compelling (and appealingly tragic) back-story. This helpfully allows us

to understand the very capitalists we both jealously abhor and secretly admire as sympathetic characters who are themselves also victimized by their own infection.

Zombies, on the other hand, are consistently presented to us as thoroughly abject, in the first place because their loss of individuality has made them part of a nameless collective. While we may be tempted to perceive the zombies' state of living death as a traumatic loss of individual agency, its most horrific aspect is the zombie's sudden inability to claim ownership of private property. Whereas the vampire not only comes to claim ownership of whomever he or she carefully chooses to infect, the zombie horde consumes indiscriminately, and – most importantly – without any conception of individual ownership. Through this clear juxtaposition, the vampire/zombie dialectic symbolically connects individualism to capitalist conceptions of private property, while the zombie's inherently collective nature is rendered grossly appalling through its very lack of any such concept. After all, what is more terrifying to the individual capitalist than the loss of those very consumer choices that shape one's precious identity?

Thus, even as shared conceptions of class identity have become more and more difficult to recognize for many in the era of global capitalism, Marx's use of the vampire has remained profoundly useful for understanding and expressing capitalist culture's continuing investment in narrative fantasies that remain grounded in traditional conceptions of class identity. So while neither vampire nor zombie offers the most nuanced expression of the workings of contemporary neoliberalism, they remain vital tools for recognising popular narrative tropes as ideological expressions of capitalism's most basic cultural logic.

VOC

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The Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*; VOC) was founded in 1602. It was a private company with extensive state support, monopoly rights to the Dutch-Asian spice trade, and far-reaching prerogatives to wage war and make treaties and alliances. The VOC became the instrument for the violent subjection of many parts of Asia to Dutch commercial interests until the end of the eighteenth century. It laid the foundations for the colonial regime of the Dutch in Indonesia that lasted well into the twentieth century. Without mentioning its name, Marx discussed the VOC and its legacy in a brief but powerful passage at the end of *Capital*, Volume I. After citing the British colonial administrator Thomas Stamford Raffles's judgement that the history of Dutch rule in Asia was "one of the most extraordinary relations of treachery, bribery, massacre, and meanness", Marx continues:

Nothing is more characteristic than their system of stealing men, to get slaves for Java. The men stealers were trained for this purpose. The thief, the interpreter, and the seller, were the chief agents in this trade, native princes the chief sellers. The young people stolen, were thrown into the secret dungeons of Celebes, until they were ready for sending to the slave-ships. An official report says: