

Un-tragic Reenactment

On DAD DRACULA IS DEAD by Rebecca Ann Tess

The film starts in the studio. The artist's studio serves as the film studio. Filming this location is itself a restaging: in the first decades of film history early cinematic efforts were produced in small studios, show booths, and basement theaters before these were supplanted by the interiors of large studios. Appearing before the three screens are the phantoms of those who are frozen in film stills on the walls. The phantoms and their originals stem from the arsenal of classic narrative cinema of the 1920s and 30s. In 1917 the extended phase of the Hollywood studio system was launched, establishing the lasting hegemony of US motion pictures. From this a specific style of filmmaking emerged that was marked by a lack of creative freedom within rigid genre conventions and a clearly defined framework of standards. The Hays Code from 1930 defined precisely what could be shown and what was considered morally offensive. It was a period during which the open demand for positively portraying other lifestyles seemed barely imaginable, but was also the blossoming of what was later termed *Queer Reading*. Between the lines of the moral message, the excesses of the body offered an imaginary space for a polymorphously perverse public. What's more, the script always came up with reasons to put women in pants and boys in suits or to offer virgins up to bona fide vamps.

The film *DAD DRACULA IS DEAD* is dedicated to such moments in film history. Numerous monographs on queer film history have been published. In her film Tess cites Andrea Weiss' 1992 book *Vampires and Violets. Lesbians in the Cinema* Yet, where others like Canadian artist Aleesa Cohene assemble found footage into a double projection in such a way that the on hand lesbian erotic subtext becomes the exclusive focus of queer empathy, Tess opts for an analytical point of view. Her stylistic device is the historical restaging, the reenactment. Documentary filmmakers and artists like Rithy Panh, Jeremy Deller, or Mike Figgis use roll playing as a prominent form of political film aesthetic to generate a renewed relationship to historical events. But the shortcomings of many reenactments lie in one being taken in by the specter of authenticity as well as the monumental and de-contextualizing relationship to history.

DAD DRACULA IS DEAD is far removed from this. It takes the unobtrusive moments of film history as its subject matter. The film combines reenactment with alienation. Its figures aren't just acting; they're putting their acting on display, and commenting on their gestures in executing them. Their stylized acting turns the subjective sensibilities of reference films—tragedy, drama, and comedy—into an objective melancholy, i.e. one that precedes their acting. Time and again Fassbinder showed us this kind of playing with the game of acting. His film *IN EINEM JAHR MIT 13 MONDEN* served in Tess' latest film *DEMNÄCHST/UPCOMING* as the point of departure for a pop-feminist homage. This film also leaves the actors in the scenes a touch too long before the cut releases us from the disruption of the illusion. The figures in *DAD DRACULA IS DEAD* are costumed phantom figures that appear before their own frozen, black and white backdrops, act out their scenes, are transformed, and fall silent.

The title *DAD DRACULA IS DEAD* is a reference to Lambert Hillyer's *DRACULA'S DAUGHTER* from 1936. It's a film about the problem of freedom. It begins with the death of the father and the daughter's hope of finally leading a "normal life" and of being able to be a woman, a hope that naturally goes awry and ends in the tragic death of the urge-possessed virgin murderer. The title of Tess' film eschews tragedy, turning it into pop-cultural irony. The film historical analysis results in a rewriting of the tale as plot and as film history. In Hillyer's horror-melodrama hope only exists at the outset, in Tess' version it survives past the end. Here the vampire-phantom can be heard defiantly lamenting having to die in such a weakened state—and then not even as a lesbian. Here the revisionist moment of the reenactment calls for redemption, a freeing of film history from the history of patriarchy. The beginning, which ends in tragic death, is at the end here a happy end.

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(Translated by Erik Smith)