

**The Emergence of the Occult from within  
the Culture of the Occult,  
or, When a Vampire is Just Trying to Get Laid**

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*This essay was originally written for and presented at the Trans/national Film and Literature Conference at Florida State University in 2005. The general theme of the conference was “cultural transmission” which explains the presence of the phrase in the text. This is mostly that presentation, though with some minor editing, the insertion of one extended passage and a couple minor passages, and the note at the end as regards de Sade’s 120 Days.*

*I will admit, it is one of my favorites of my essays, both in subject and in performance.*

My playground today is the Karnstein trilogy, the trio of vampire movies produced by Hammer studios in ‘70 and ‘71: *The Vampire Lovers*, *Lust for a Vampire*, and *Twins of Evil*. They are all based to one degree or another on Le Fanu’s novella “Carmilla,” though they can not at all be said to be in any sequence, or even of the same narrative world. They are famous among the Hammer films as being at the vanguard of the studio’s move into nudity and more explicit sexuality, the first two films marked especially for their lesbian content, the third for featuring as the title characters Playboy’s first twin playmates. In fact, sexuality dominates the thematics of the three films to the point of their being far more about desire than horror: not solely within the narrative proper, but also in the film as engaged by the viewer. Yet much of the body of that thematics – both visual and ideational – would hardly fall under the heading of the erudite. Segments of the films are easily described as soft-core porn; and it is not surprising how many

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reviews of the films – irrespective of their overall opinions on quality — will speak of an “immature approach” to the sexuality, or “scenes that exist only for the titillation of the male audience,”<sup>1</sup> or even “adolescent masturbatory fantasy.”<sup>2</sup> One online reviewer renamed the second film *Lust for Knockers*.<sup>3</sup> All fairly, and all with ample reason: for example, *Vampire Lovers* includes a scene of a towel clad and topless Ingrid Pitt chasing a half-undressed, soon-to-be victim around a bed in girlish, slumber party giddiness; and *Lust for a Vampire* features a running shot tracking through the rooms of a finishing school while the young women attendees are dressing for bed.

Fairly, and with reason, I agree. But not necessarily to the films’ condemnation. There is a purpose being served by these scenes, by the sighing, the giggling, and the bevy of breasts both bodiced and exposed being offered the viewer. And the reviewers were right on in labeling it “titillation.” But let us not demean ourselves by over-quickly accepting with the word the connotations of triviality normally tied thereto, or accepting the dismissals implicit in the various reviews. There *is* a purpose here; and to explore that purpose we must stand in the role not of the prurient and proper Miss Simpson, co-founder and head of the finishing school in *Lust*, a cowardly soul indentured to the hierarchies of society, but something more of Baron Karnstein, the amateur debauchee of *Twins*, who having become bored of the charade occult rituals arranged and performed for his pleasure takes the sacrificial knife into his own hands and, plunging it into the chest of an abducted – and of course naked – woman, moves from being a viewer to being

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<sup>1</sup> S c r e e n o n l i n e , G e o r g e W a t s o n ;  
<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/559185/>

<sup>2</sup> H o r r o r r e v i e w s , R i c h a r d S c h e i b ;  
<http://www.moria.co.nz/horror/vampirelovers.htm>

<sup>3</sup> C l a s s i c H o r r o r , J e n n D u g l o s ; <http://classic-horror.com/reviews/lustforavamp.shtml>

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a participant, for which he is rewarded, through the accidental/on-purpose resurrection of Mircalla Karnstein, the central vampire of the trilogy, who exists in *Twins* long enough only to turn the Baron into a vampire in a meeting that is not so much an attack as sexual liaison – even, sexual initiation.

In the Karnstein trilogy the situation wherein cultural transmission might be studied the reverse of what is the expected with a vampire film. The films take place on the continent, in Styria, in Austria, in the territory around Karnstein castle, the seat of a royal family of vampires that have been terrorizing the locals for centuries. As such, in the films, it is not the vampire as invader; the foreigners are come to the vampire: be they Italian orphans come to live with their uncle in *Twins*, a wealthy English family living abroad in *Lovers*, or an English author come upon an English finishing school founded on the continent according to the current rage as in *Lust*. But there is little if anything that might be seen as a cultural clash between the English foreigners and the Austrian natives, outside of the English being somewhat slow on the uptake – and only somewhat – of what is happening to the young women in their care. Otherwise, cultural issues transfer readily from foreigners to Austrians: the servants are servants, the peasants are peasants, the wealthy and royal are likewise. Though, perhaps with one exception: the entrance of the Italian sisters in *Twins*, for they have been forced by their parents’ death to leave a morally freer Italy and have found themselves dropped into the rigid family structure of their puritanical, religiously fanatical uncle. But I take that more as a clash across social distinctions rather than national boundaries. The cross-national conflicts that might exist with the twins dissolve quickly as they situate themselves upon a more primary axis: for around Castle Karnstein, within the Karnstein trilogy, the primary conflict is not cultural but metaphysical; philosophical; ethical. Even – or should I say *especially* – aesthetic. When Mircalla Karnstein comes down from the mount in *Lovers* and *Lust* it is not an act of oppression, but of passion. She is seeking not

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the material but the sensual; not wealth but bodies. And her initiation of the Baron in *Twins* is likewise: an initiation not into power – he already has power – but into *pleasure*. The conflict in the films of the trilogy is not national but cosmological, one between the world of people and the world of the vampire: not as two cultures, but as two modes of existence. It is between good and evil, yes, and as well those other conflicts that underlie the good-evil division: such as between serenity and violence, decency and debauchery, society and the individual; and especially propriety and the imagination, *culture* and the *occult*.

Many terms in opposition, all of which are, ultimately, the same opposition: that between civilization and its opposite, the *erotic*. It is this opposition that is being offered the viewer when the Mircalla of *Twins* pumps a candlestick while morally deflowering the Baron; or when the Mircalla of *Lovers* exposes the pale skin and pink nipples of the red-headed Emma, her new found love; or when the Mircalla of *Lust*, topless and in the messaging hands of her roommate, is walked in upon by Miss Playfair, and neither flees nor cowers like her fellow, but sits unwavering, her body displayed unflinchingly to both the intruder and the viewer. And this is a key point: offered to *both* the character Miss Playfair and to the viewer of the film. As said, there is a purpose here: an argument made not through the logic of syllogism but through the stirring of genitals.

The argument as presented in this paper begins with the shape, the colors, the movements of Mircalla’s breasts, and those of her victims – and, granted, while our third Mircalla never exposes her breasts, hers are the only ones grasped, and the pleasure offered suffices to the point. There is, though, in *Twins* the Collinson twin, who offers her body to us in wild assault as substitute.

From bodies in nakedness the argument here develops by way of a reference, to a parallel, and from that to an exploration of a discourse not of language, but yet of ideas. I will use a small handful of scenes from the films. And if on my way I discard the strictures of narrative, it is because the argument demands its debilitation, its

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flailing, its abuse, its debasement. For behind the argument of the erotic lies a simple truth, said often enough in other words, by other thinkers: the aesthetic demands the death of grammars. And it is not for naught that while both playmate twins star in the film, only Madeline Collinson – who plays Frieda, the evil of the two sisters – exposes herself to the audience: for in the argument being made it would be the evil archetype who would expose *her* body for *our* pleasure.

But I get ahead of myself. First, the reference: one perhaps more circumstantial than direct. But it is difficult not to believe that the language, the locale, and attitudes of the Baron and much of *Twins* are not derived in some small part or even if indirectly from de Sade. There is too much licentiousness about it, too much libertinage – if an overly amateurish and uncontrolled libertinage on the parts of the Baron and Frieda, and an overly officious and dutiful one on the part of the religious brotherhood. In the film, the parallel to de Sade seems most immediate in the early scene in Castle Karnstein, where the Baron is phlegmatically if not irritatedly observing a dinner theater performance of occultists summoning the devil, naked sacrifice and all, that has been arranged by his lackey Dietrich. It is implied this is the latest of a long chain of such performances, of which the Baron is now grown quite bored. For while the performance may be realistic – “Look! He is possessed!” Dietrich emphatically narrates as the lead occultist raises his knife –, for while it is *realist*, it is not *real*. And thus the pleasure it offers is limited by the divide created between the real and what is but impersonation of the real. It is not until narration is overturned, until the *actor* is cast aside and the Baron takes the knife into his *own* hand, that realism is replaced with reality: and *pleasure*, the pleasure of the *erotic*, enters the situation – if but momentarily, for after the Baron slays the woman in an ad lib summoning of Satan he returns to the ennui of his dinner and drink, where he remains until the blood he spilt unknowingly seeps through the floor and raises the

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Mircalla from her grave, whereon she accosts the Baron and initiates him fully into the realm of participation, of pleasure; of violence and the erotic. This extended sex scene is the only stage time that the trilogy’s lead role of Mircalla gets in *Twins*, though it is defining of the third movie. For everything after must be understood through this initiation: in terms of pleasure, of eroticism; of evil and good; of the occult and its opposite, culture. *But* — with all terms to be understood first and foremost through *pleasure*, as the scenes that follow must also be understood, be they either the brotherhood’s burning on crosses the innocent women who feed their fear via their sexuality or the attempted rape of Anton by Frieda; whether it be breasts heaving in agony or breasts exposed in seduction.

But I am again getting ahead of myself. The initial scene echos the primary setting of de Sade’s *The 120 Days of Sodom*, the room wherein the four libertines assemble with their playthings to hear the narratives of equally debauched women: not only to hear, though, but also to *experience*. For the “descriptions of [. . .] debauchery’s extravagances” were not realist dinner theater, but lubrication and energization of the mind, with the ultimate intent being “to end by extinguishing, by means of either their wives or those various objects, the conflagration the storytellers were to have lit” (218-9). But I want to move to an even simpler parallel: one made in my mind not in transference from the film to the book, but from the book to the film: that between the Castle Karnstein, viewed at a distance upon its mountain top in stock footage, and that of the Chateau of Silling, the site of *The 120 Days*. The distinctive and necessary characteristic of the Chateau is its inaccessibility. The complex could be attained only by traversing a hard and dangerous trail up a near impossible mountainside, and then by crossing a “fine wooden bridge” over a crevice of a “depth of a thousand feet or more,” the bridge being the only means of access to the other side of the mountain, upon which there was a

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little plain, upon which was built the Chateau of Silling. The phrase that caught my eye and mind: “the bridge removed or destroyed, there is not on this entire earth a single being, of no matter what species you may imagine, capable of gaining this small plot of land” (236).

Which cannot, logically, be true. The bridge does exist. At some point in time the bridge had to be built: which implies someone had to cross to the other side of the chasm *before* the bridge existed so as to secure a footing by which then to construct the bridge.

Am I nit picking the plot? Perhaps; but as already said, narrative is a necessary victim of the play of this argument. And this wound in the narrative opens a curious door, the offered parallel between Silling and Karnstein. The fault in the description of Silling is the result of attempting to reach an extreme: in this point an extreme of isolation. That attempt to bend the narrative to an extreme ends up metaphorizing the passage – or, perhaps more accurately, creates a knowingly useful metaphorization: used in part in creating the cast of extreme isolation that is essential to the irony of *The 120 Days*; and, in the play of those ironies, used also in part as extension to a passage four pages earlier (here in word slightly misquoted, but in spirit intact):

there is no question but that every ardent imagination prefers in lubricity the extraordinary to the commonplace [. . . and there is] no more reason to be astonished at that, I say, than at a man who for his promenades prefers the mountains’ arid and rugged terrain to the monotonous pathways of the plains. (233)

Finally, it is used to create resonance out of the idea of the bridge. If no being of this earth could cross the chasm without the bridge, and the bridge was nonetheless built, might there not be the idea that the people who built it were not of this earth, that the libertines who crossed into the Chateau at Silling were not natural – or by their burning of the bridge were made no longer natural – but supernatural. Occult. As our other libertine, Baron Karnstein

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describes it to Frieda in *Twins* as he is about to initiate her:

We are the undead. [. . .] I can savor the most extreme of Satan’s delights. I can feed on the blood of a human victim.

[. . .] It is a test. One who is dedicated to the devil and his deeds will not die by a vampire’s bite, but will become one of the undead. A vampire. The good and the innocent die.

Except, the metaphoric bridge to Karnstein is never burned. As with the path to the Chateau, we will make a fatal mis-step if we tread here too quickly. The language – that both of de Sade and the Karnstein trilogy – can not be taken in unexamined utility: it *must* be understood out of our opposition of the cultural and the occult. De Sade writes of violence he sees as inherent to the world but antithetical to culture: as George Bataille writes in reference to de Sade (this from his *Erotism*), violence is “the opposite of the solidarity with other people implicit in logic, laws and language” (189). Language especially: for it is language that is the substructure of culture; it is “by definition the expression of civilized man” (186). If violence is outside of culture, and language is the expression of culture, then violence is inexpressible in language: and in that within culture the world is defined by “logic, laws and language,” that which is not *of* logic and language it is not ‘of’ the world: thus the vampiric as perceived by the merely human: as undead, as otherworldly, as *super* natural, as evil, as occult.

But de Sade recognizes the world is *defined* but not *constituted* by logic, law and language: its perception is, and only to those who like Miss Simpson exist in blind servitude to culture and cower and whimper before the violent and the erotic, and she is in *Lust* the high representative of those “feeble, enfeathered creatures destined solely for [the] pleasures” of the libertines (250). De Sade’s philosophies are at their heart a presentation of the recognition that culture and civilization is not the world of Nature, but of man. And as such what would be called supernatural or unnatural, obscene or occult to the cultural, would be yet wholly Natural to the libertine. The primary irony of *The 120 Days* is that the libertines isolate

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themselves from the world of culture, but they instill in their Chateau a legalistic rigidity that can only stand in opposition to the experience of libertinage: as such, the culture of the Chateau tears itself apart for the stress of the two antagonizing aims, and the book itself deteriorates into what is but clinical taxonomy: rational realism taken to an extreme.

Again, the language itself must be examined. De Sade writes of eroticism and violence, but his methodology is based in the language of civilization, that very language and law that holds him within the Bastille – after all, *The 120 Days* is nonetheless a scientific categorization of *debauchery*. His purpose, as limited by the language he is using, is not to *enact* violence, but, as Bataille says, to “bring violence into the sphere of conscious experience” (194). There, as already shown, ideation may do its work, as with the words of the storytellers in *The 120 Days*, enflaming the imagination of its readers, raising them above the cultural into the experiential, the Natural.

But not as a transcendent: though it may appear so to the culturally bound. And I find it not coincidental that deSade takes a jab at the Scholastics in *The 120 Days*, when the storyteller Duclos describes the “learned and grave professor of Scholasticism at the Sorbonne who, tired of wasting his time proving the existence of God in his school, would sometimes come to our brothel to convince himself of the existence of his dear God’s creatures” (335). This is far from merely a passing comment: it speaks not only of perversion but of cosmology. The Scholastics stand in opposition to de Sade. Theirs is a eminent theology: that of a god who exists outside of his created world, and of a world that reflects the laws, logic and language of that divine god – as such a god who exists not in nature, but only in the logic of his proofs of existence; and thus the professor’s turn from theology to perversity – read here as perversion not of Nature, but of Scholastic logic, of Scholasticism itself. For de Sade’s Nature is that of an *immanent* cosmos of the order of that of the Magus Giordano Bruno. In the immanent

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cosmos, and we return to Bataille, sadism is “a sovereign and indestructible element of mankind”; it is “a concern of the intimate reality of man” (185): an idea with two necessary suppositions: (1) that in man there is “an irresistible excess which drives him to destroy and brings him into harmony with the ceaseless and inevitable annihilation of everything that is born, grows, and strives to last”; and, (2) that that excess and harmony carries “a kind of divine or, more accurately, sacred significance” (185).

Divinity lies not outside the cosmos but within it: it *is* Nature itself. It is the *cosmos itself* – more exactly, it is *participation* in the cosmos itself, in whatever form. Violence is thus an issue of good and evil only in the grammars of culture. In the experience of the immanent cosmos, there is a different understanding: violence as part of the cosmos can neither be superadditive to reality nor exist outside of its divine and godly limits: writes Bataille, “violence never declares either its own existence or its right to exist; it simply exists” (188). In this, de Sade – and Bruno before him, and that geometrically perverse Scholastic de Cusa before him – offers a small but important correction to the archetypal studies of those as Eliade and Cassirer: a correction of attitude, one which points out an over-emphasis upon the positive force, on the act of *creation*. Sacred making, the hierphantic act, is coupled, must be coupled, in aeternum and with equally archetypal destruction. This is the *coincidentia oppositorum* that is the necessary basis of the immanent cosmology and which must be eliminated from the eminent, where good and evil, civilization and eroticism are set as polar opposites. To bring us back around to Castle Karnstein and the Chateau of Silling, the vampire, the libertine, are not beyond the Natural: Bataille: “De Sade’s sovereign man does not offer our wretchedness a transcendent reality. [H]is aberration points the way to the *continuity* of crime! This *continuity transcends nothing*. It can not overtake what is lost. [Rather, he] links *infinite continuity with infinite destruction*” (176, my emphasis).

Such is the end and desire of the participators in the erotic:

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“Our only real pleasure is to squander our resources to no purpose [. . .]; we always want to be sure of the uselessness of extravagance. We want to feel as remote from the world where thrift is the rule as we can. As remote as we can: – that is hardly strong enough; we want a world turned upside down and inside out” (Batailles 170). We seek to revel with Mircalla in the bodies of the young women she lusts after. We sit anxiously for bodices to be ripped, for bodies to be displayed, with every bared breast presenting itself in the full potentiality of an immanent cosmos; and in that potentiality, with every bared breast, every open thigh, every lascivious mouth working the gleeful and pleasurable destruction of civilization, and the consequent discovery of harmony and unity in the greater reality of the Natural. But not the pink breast or undulant body as categorized, defined, or narrated through realism or culture: the storyteller exists to kindle and enrage passion, which can not be done in the language of laws, but only in the non-language of eroticism and violence. As de Sade writes:

it is not the *object* of libertine intentions which fires us, but the *idea* of evil, and that consequently it is thanks only to evil and only in the name of evil one stiffens, not thanks to the object, and were this object to be divested of the power to cause us to do evil, our prick would droop, ‘twould interest us no more.”

Or, in the words of pop-culture, out the mouth of Axel Foley: your dick – or clit – is *supposed to get hard*.

Such is the desire of the libertine, of the vampire – of the evil. Also, of the *lover*; of the *poet*; of the *aesthete*. Bataille: “Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism: to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea” (25): blending and fusion toward infinity: the participation in an immanent cosmos. But yet again, attend the language: poetry here is not the poetry of culture. It is the poetry of the erotic. Not a poetry of grammars, of laws and language, but

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of sensuality, and above sensuality, self-conscious thought. It is not the *object* of evil that arouses, but the *idea* of evil. The performances staged for the Baron were empty for their aping realism: the ritual found eroticism only when it became *real*, when it became *being*. Poetry of the erotic is not merely the pleasures of the material – “Being is also the excess of being, the upward surge towards the impossible. Excess leads to the moment when transcendent pleasure is no longer confined to the senses, when what is felt through the senses is negligible and thought, the mental mechanism that rules pleasure, takes over the whole being” (173). Poetry, immanent poetry, is not a poetry of grammar and narration; but of participation in the unified – the inseparable – archetypes of mythical creation and destruction.

Poetry thus is not a poetry of language – for language serves culture, not the erotic. But – and here we are again – the bridge over the chasm was obviously built. Poetry must be somehow of language, but a language put to the service of the erotic, a language whose experience is the destruction of culture and of cultural language. Whereas violence is outside of language, it is a simple thing to speak from within the ratio of culture and say that “since language is by definition the expression of civilized man, violence is silent” (Batailles 186). What is difficult is this shift of language from that of the cultural to that of the occult, that of the erotic. This is the very argument presented to us by the Karnstein trilogy.

Perhaps the most direct examples are the two primary attacks presented in *Vampire Lovers*, the first attacks of Mircalla on the film’s two primary victims: Laura and Emma. When the attacks occur, the film breaks from direct portrayal – from realism – into various visual effects: the colors become grey-toned; images are overlaid and distorted by effect or tight zoom; all is presented not linearly but in montage. The purpose is to *break* from narration, to break from realism, and move instead to *experience*: an experience not narrated but *created* and then offered for our *participation*. Not a grammar, but an eroticism whose construction and performance is meant to

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enflame the imagination, and “there is simply no conceiving the degree to which man varies [‘debauchery’s extravagances’] when his imagination grows enflamed” (218).

*Lust for a Vampire* offers us a more direct presentation of the argument: first in the initial moments of the bedroom scene first spoken of above. The film cuts to a scene of two of the young women in conversation: one says of the male schoolmaster: “Mr. Barton’s just a nasty little man. You notice the way he’s always standing around watching us when we’re dancing?” The idea of debauchery, of sexual perversion, of evil, is presented directly in the dialogue. Yet, not only have we just watched the women dancing ourselves, and participated in Richard Lestrangle’s openly lecherous enjoyment of bare bodies in sheer gowns, the comment is made *while the student is dressing*; and before she speaks the viewer has been given full feast of her breasts. A similar moment occurs at the end of the film, when the father of Mircalla’s first victim is speaking in a tavern with a pathologist he has brought from Vienna. The pathologist is speaking:

I can do nothing. We are talking about matters beyond science. About the dark imaginings of men. About metaphysics; the nature of good and evil. You don’t need a doctor, you need . . . .”

At which point the Bishop makes his appearance in the film. His inadvertent introduction is important, for he enters as an authority of the metaphysical – but one whose authority is based in the world of law, logic, and verisimilitudinal language. But the film will not let such a symbol of good civilization stand unmocked, and the scene is immediately countered with one of Mircalla being caught in flagrante – both by camera and character – ravishing a naked student . . . a ravishing that, after the interruptor leaves her door, and after the victim sighs desirously to her, she finishes off in lubricitous pleasure. The camera angle is close to, the women’s bodies are tightly tangled, the knot of arms framing a perfectly presented and most delicious breast.

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And it is a beautiful breast; more correctly, a beautiful shot which holds a breast as its focus. The contrasts of colors, the framing of the arms, the faint exaggerations caused by the breast's position and the mass just pressing upon it: much could be done with that breast.

A Sadeian phrase: but also an artist's phrase – *much could be done with*. I make here no claims of cultural value to this trilogy of films. After all, they are Hammer, not Kubrick. Yet there is to them an *aesthetic* value outside – beyond – that cultural value, that value so capably critiqued by Sontag. The disposable 'Works' that Barthes enjoys-but-critiques are disposable because their enjoyment is so limited that one reading exhausts that value. Whereas the 'Texts' he praises offer the endless *jouissance* of *écriture*.

Another Sadeian utterance. The Sadeian attitude is the aesthetic attitude: the creator is also sadist (Sadeistic), in that the creator in an immanent cosmos is erotically and violently in grapple with that cosmos. The Baron is bored by the eminent recreations of realist mimicry of the occult, the disposable, ever repeated performance of culture; the events become of value when he becomes an active reader, a reader-also-maker, participatory in the creating of the potentialities of the text, when he breaks the barrier of realism and enters primary engagement with reality, when he accepts the erotic love offered by Mircalla; so also is the viewer separated from experience until they accept the framing of a body and breast in offer of thereof, a breast offered both to be viewed and to be metempsychotically recreated within the cosmos of the viewer. The moment, presented within the microcosmos of the film, transcends titillation, the mere narration of sex. It offers the liaison of engagement. Where the Hammer trilogy transcends their generic categorization is where they too, in parallel to the scene of the occultists, move from realist impersonation to occultic invitation and initiation. Where they reject the energies of cultural transmission and put culture – and the culturally devaluing labels of “titillation” and “adolescent fantasy” – itself to the test.

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It is, after all, a marvelous and marvelously offered breast.

And we find ourselves, appropriately, back where we began, in soft core porn and titillation. But also with the argument presented now developed. An argument not of language, but of *experience*. The erotic and violent can not be narrated: it is not of the realist, it is of *reality*. If violence and the erotic can not be effectively represented in language, language can yet be manipulated to create *experience*: and in the Karnstein trilogy, that experience is purposed. It is *meant* to titillate. It is *meant* to stir the mind *and* the genitals. For it is through the genitals, for it is through *participation*, and the three films continually invite such participation, that the film can ascend out of the mundane narratives and repetitive grammars of culture, and move into the cosmological, psychological, erotic and aesthetic playground of the occult.

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