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Stephanie Rothman

Q&A WITH THE DIRECTOR OF *THE VELVET VAMPIRE* AND *THE STUDENT NURSES*



WITH CO-SPONSORSHIP from the Center for the Study of Women, The Crank, UCLA's grad student run film society, recently hosted a special screening of writer-director Stephanie Rothman's acclaimed film *The Velvet Vampire* (1971) with the filmmaker in attendance. Rothman, writer-director of "exploitation" films like *The Student Nurses* (1970), *Terminal Island* (1973), and *The Working Girls* (1974) was one of the most prolific female filmmakers working in Hollywood in the 1970s. During that decade, her films were at the center of feminist debates concerning the most effective way in which women could use film to overturn Hollywood's often degrading representations. While some argued that the creation of avant-garde and independent films was the key to breaking the influence of the patriarchal system, others contended that women working within the mainstream could dismantle and revise Hollywood representations to reveal and disempower their misogynistic qualities. Scholar Pam Cook wrote that "Rothman's work was part of this polemic, since her films could be seen as a prime example of feminist subversion from within, using the generic formulae of exploitation cinema in the interest of her own agenda as a woman director."¹

In her introduction to *The Velvet Vampire*, Rothman stated that, “while in the *Dracula* films, both men and women were the victims of vampires, it was the women who always seemed to endure the ecstasy of having their blood sucked while lying passively in their beds. If men were assaulted by vampires, it was usually while battling them, and they either destroyed the vampire, or met a violent death themselves. So I decided to reverse this convention, and have the man enjoy a masochistic orgasmic death by vampire while the woman battled back.” Below are excerpts from an audience Q&A with Rothman that followed the screening.

The Velvet Vampire was the last movie you made for New World Pictures and Roger Corman before you made *Group Marriage* for Dimension Pictures, the company that you co-founded with [husband and collaborator] Charles S. Swartz and Laurence Woolner. How did making movies for your own company differ from making them for Corman?

[The experiences were] not really that much different, because in both instances the decisions that I had to make and Charles had to make were market driven, since we were making exploitation films, which means that

we were making films on a very low budget for primarily drive-ins and older theaters in the central cities. We knew what our market was supposed to be and what elements we had to put in it. I suppose many commercial films are market driven to some extent, but ours were very much so. So, there were certain ingredients that always had to be in it, like nudity, and any kind of sexual expression had to be controlled by what would get us an R rating. There had to be a certain look to the film. Our actors almost always had to be very attractive, those in the leading roles. And there were only certain kinds of stories we could tell. So, the limitations that we encountered making films at New World extended into our work for Dimension Pictures... Our films were financed by the regional sub-distributors who distributed these films throughout the country, and this was their expectation, that we would make this kind of film. The freedom that existed was the freedom to take what were the genre expectations and do unexpected things with them. Do things that would make them seem relevant to a wider audience than the usual fans of exploitation films. So we included

political opinions and we tried to make the stories have more psychological depth. We tried, given the restrictions of the genre, to address some ideas that were ignored by Hollywood and by most other films made at that time. As long as we met the sub-distributors expectations, they didn't mind if we exceeded them in other ways. In fact, they were happy if we did things that were controversial, because that would give them publicity in the papers. That's not why we did them, but that was certainly why they accepted these things. As long as the theater wasn't burned down, it was all right if we exceeded the conventional expectations for this kind of film.

I thought it was very interesting what you said before the screening about it being a conscious decision on your part to explore what happens when you switch the roles and make the female [in the vampire-victim relationship] the more active of the two, and the male the more passive. And so I wondered if you'd say a bit more about how you are approaching this in relation to other vampire films.

The only way that I could see to make this kind of film and to make it interesting was to reverse expectations, at this point. The obvious passivity of women in vampire films

was both disturbing to me and rather boring. As far as making another Dracula film, well I couldn't compete with the ones made by Hammer Films. I didn't have the money, I didn't have the facilities or anything. It just seemed to be the obvious thing to do. And I tried to make it as amusing as possible, because I know that audiences—like yourselves, you were laughing quite a bit—you know what the landmarks are, what the geography of a vampire film is. You know what to expect. And so when the expected comes along, all you can do is hope that you have presented it in a way that people will laugh in recognition at the fresh twist you have given it.

Working in the exploitation film community, can you talk a little bit about what the relationship between mainstream and exploitation groups were? Did you ever want to cross over to the other side, if that's the right term? I know there's lots of talk about folks who worked with Corman who then went on to make mainstream Hollywood films. Did you ever want to do that?

I like the way you put it, to the other side! It's like crossing to the valley of death, or life, or whatever. It was my fervent wish that I would be able to make mainstream films.

*I wanted to, I never got the opportunity. I tried for about 10 years and then I gave up and just decided to continue living my life, not making films anymore. Was there any interaction between me and people who made mainstream films? Well, it's very interesting you should ask that question with regards to *The Velvet Vampire*, because as I was getting ready to come here today I remembered something that is, in fact, a beautiful example of that. I was called in to meet an executive at MGM after I'd made *The Velvet Vampire*, in fact it was perhaps three or four years later. And this person said to me "Oh, you know, we were talking about you the other day in a meeting, because we've hired the younger brother of Ridley Scott to make a film, and we think we'd like it to be a vampire film, and we were talking about how we would like it to sort of be like *The Velvet Vampire*." And my response was, "Well, if you want a film like *The Velvet Vampire*, why don't you get Stephanie Rothman to make it?" So—yes, my encounter with the mainstream was, a few people had heard of me, and some of them even were responsive to my work, but that didn't seem to matter. I didn't get the*

jobs. There was one time when I had a three-picture deal to write and direct for a studio. The man who hired me also had a slate of other films to produce there. When I finished my first script, the first picture he produced came out and went into release. It had two very big stars in it, and it bombed. So that was the end of his deal, and that was the end of my deal. There's a lot of happenstance that goes into a career... So, yes, I did cross over, but the gates were always closed.

Would you say that going to USC film school or going to any film school was actually a stepping stone to getting to Corman or to getting into filmmaking? You and Charles both went to USC, right?

Yes, that's correct, we went to USC... When I went there, there were only two women: myself and an air force captain who was there to learn how to make documentary films. [Going to USC] certainly was [a stepping stone]. It was actually a very lucky occurrence. In those days, people went to film school, but basically, if you didn't have some kind of nepotistic connection to the film industry, if your parent or parents weren't in the craft unions or they weren't producers or very strongly

socially connected, you just disappeared, and most of my classmates did just disappear.

USC got a call from Roger Corman, asking for them to send over somebody to interview to be his assistant and they sent me over.

I'm very grateful to USC, otherwise I don't know how I would have gotten launched as a filmmaker in that time in that world. We're talking 1964 or 1965. A long, long time ago.

Could you tell us more about working for Roger Corman?

Working for Roger was really wonderful. He just threw me into the swimming pool and I had to swim. He was very encouraging. I know that some people came away from their experience with him a little bitter, but I personally found him to be very encouraging. Really, he gave me the self-confidence to do what I needed to do. He was thoroughly behind me. He was, as I've said before, the only mentor I ever had, and until my last breath I will be very grateful to him for that.

Any crazy anecdotes or outrageous stories from the set of *The Velvet Vampire*?

No, I really don't, I'm sorry, and I'll tell you why I don't: it was a very difficult film to

make. I think it looks very expensive for the budget we made it on. Through completion, that is to say through the answer print, it cost \$165,000. And we went on location to the desert, it was very hard to shoot in the desert. We were all brushing against spiny Joshua trees and cacti. I can't tell you how many needles we had to pull out of ourselves at the end of each day. Then the weather was so changeable: one moment it was bright and sunny and the next we were in the middle of a sandstorm. Equipment would get stuck in the sand and we'd have to push it out; the whole crew, everybody. I think there was a maximum of fourteen people on the crew, including the producer and director. So it was a hard film to shoot. In addition to that, the actress who played the young girl was very anxious and very difficult. I had to give her more reassurance than, you know, I thought I had in my entire being to give in a lifetime just to keep her going! I guess maybe the only crazy thing is that—[during a scene in the movie] where there was a sandstorm and a bus came, the bus got stuck in the sand, and all of the male members of the crew started pushing the bus out and I joined them. And

they all stopped pushing and yelled at me to stop instead of concentrating on their own pushing. They correctly wanted to save my energy for setting up the next shot. That's the craziest memory I have and it's not very crazy.

Ben Sher is working towards his M.A. in Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA. He has written for Leonard Maltin's *Movie Guide* (2007 and 2008 eds.) and *Fangoria Magazine*.

For more information about The Crank, including a schedule of this quarter's screenings, please visit <http://www.studentgroups.ucla.edu/thecrank>.

NOTES

1. Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 57.