

e-flux Film



Yong Xiang Li, *I'm Not in Love (How to Feed on Humans)* (still), 2020.

Artist Cinemas presents
I'm Not in Love (How to Feed on Humans)
 Yong Xiang Li
 2020

Artist Cinemas
 Week #4
 Date
 March 15–21, 2021

27 Minutes

Join us on e-flux Video & Film for an online screening of **Yong Xiang Li's** *I'm Not in Love* (2020), on view from Monday, March 15 through Sunday, March 21, 2021.

I'm Not in Love restores the tired motif of the vampire, injecting it with a sense of queer warmth. In this freakish and playful combination of narrative film and music video, a 386-year-old Asian vampire—Vampy—struts about town tending to his three lovers, or symbionts. Apparently, his venom is not venomous at all, but instead grants pleasure and long life. (Alvin Li)

The film is presented here alongside an interview with **Yong Xiang Li** conducted by **Alvin Li**.

I'm Not in Love is the fourth installment of *Crashing into the Future*, a program of films and interviews convened by **Cao Fei**, and comprising the fifth cycle of Artist Cinemas, a long-term, online series of film programs curated by artists for e-flux Video & Film.

Crashing into the Future will run from February 22 through April 5, 2021, screening a new film each week accompanied by an interview with the filmmaker(s) conducted by Cao Fei and invited guests.

Yong Xiang Li in conversation with Alvin Li

Alvin Li (AL):

Have you ever met a vampire? Or perhaps even more than one?

Yong Xiang Li (YXL):

If you can see one, you can see them everywhere.

AL:

When you first told me you wanted to do something about vampires, my immediate reaction was, Okay... but isn't that trope a bit worn out? In an age marked by vampiric capitalism on the one hand, and continued bloodshed and violence on the other, the vampire seems all too easy a choice to introduce certain narratives of critique. But it turns out you were interested in the vampire, or vampirism, in an altogether different sense from its usual connotations. Can you tell us more about your interpretation?

YXL:

You are not alone in this. When my friend François Pisapia—who later became the cinematographer of the film—first proposed the idea of making “vampiric visuals” about three years ago, my initial reaction was to roll my eyes. At the time, I thought vampires signified a kind of dusty Baudelairean faggotry, an over-familiar vampiric homosexual flaneur that I could barely turn into a successful Halloween costume without some ironic undertones, let alone the subject of “serious” artistic investigation. You brought up vampirism as a tired metaphor for the critique of capitalism—first proposed by Marx himself, then repeated ever since. Another insight came from one Jewish artist friend, who pointed out how vampires were quintessential anti-Semitic symbols. The violence induced by such figuration does not get diluted though it may appear to be a benign pop cliché nowadays. All these readings, united by a vague sense of negativity, are perhaps not wrong. But I later realized that the vampire is perhaps also a machine for creating both endless interpretive pleasure and alterity discourse—one that reclaims and intertwines positions of economic extractivism, sexual perversity, and racial degeneration. Jack Halberstam's inspiring study of Gothic literature, crystallized in his book *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995), really helped me understand how interpretive energy, or the pleasure of deep thinking, is not necessarily antithetical to the kind of stagnant monster-making that some of us might rail against. It is the entanglement of the two that makes the vampire such an irritating yet long-lived figure in the popular imagination.

During my research for the film I encountered Octavia Butler's novel *Fledgling* (2005), which narrates a story of symbiotic vampirism, and I immediately felt very inspired. Dominant racial/sexual order is aptly subverted in her story, not through discursive critique, but through constructing a speculative social-biological relationship. In my film, the vampire and his symbionts are overground, charismatic, seemingly joyous, and mutually dependent. They appear to be a polyamorous community taking advantage of while also caring for one another, albeit a kind of transcendental love is absent. They are entangled due to

common necessity—the need to bite and be bitten—and their social/economic/emotional attachment to this necessity. But they are far from being harmonious, pacifist gurus, and hints of drama, conflict, and negotiation of power occur throughout the film.

AL:

Reflecting on the themes of this screening program and what you said about your protagonists being bound by need and care in the absence of transcendental love, I want to suggest, and correct me if I'm wrong, that there is in fact nothing post-human about the kind of monstrosity constructed in your film. Or perhaps, it is a matter of it being more-than-human: monstrosity as a sort of evolutionary satisficing already inherent in interspecies relationships in nature.

YXL:

If by “post-human” you mean an intellectual or cultural trend that flattens the discussion of sex and race for the sake of prolonging an epistemology of stable ontology for humans and objects, then you're not wrong—this does not interest me at all. In fact, I'm very suspicious of that kind of thinking and the politics of its world-narration. Thinking through monstrosity in terms of, as you said, “more-than-human” is quite apt, since such a method perhaps also undoes the duality of culture vs. nature. I guess examining various cultural processes of producing racial or sexual monstrosity reveals the cracks in our naturalized definitions of humanity, and therefore exposes the fictionality of such constructions. The actuality of interspecies interdependence therefore enters through those cracks.

AL:

All the characters in the film are played by your friends at Städelschule, as well as yourself. Do any of you have acting experience? Did you give them specific instructions? The sort of “bad” acting seems quite deliberate...

YXL:

Friends' participation seems to me very much aligned with the tradition of low-budget production to which this film undoubtedly belongs, so this decision came naturally. But luckily, I am surrounded by talent in Frankfurt. I think apart from Johanna—the biker in the film—who has stage experience through her musical persona Iku, no one else had prior acting experience. However, the filming process was not just a dilettante's farce. The acting was indeed loosely directed by me, and slowly figured out together with the actors and the cinematographer as we went along. We obviously had a lot of laughs in the process, as evident in the outcome. The bad acting you perceived was by no means a calculated irony, but part and parcel of this type of careful amateurism.

AL:

The low-budget quirkiness certainly complements what is essentially a rom-com plot. But I also wonder how much of that choice is aesthetic as opposed to practical. Would you have done things differently if you had a bottomless budget? The precision of your works in other media—painting, sculpture—make me suspect the answer is no.

YXL:

As a practitioner I would say that I can hardly separate the aesthetic from the practical. So, decisions were also made for me by the vibe of the group, by

external factors, etc., and I was open to that from the start. I do work very differently when it comes to painting or sculpture, and keeping these different rhythms separate helps me a lot. It was a little revelation for me when I realized I'm allowed to be inconsistent with the way I work.

AL:

This film has the structure of a lengthy music video, culminating in your cover of 10cc's "I'm Not in Love" (1975), with slight tweaks to the lyrics. How do you see this song, which strikes me as borderline fuckboy, relating to your take on vampirism?

YXL:

Actually, the song kind of came first. It was initially recorded for an aborted cover project I had with another friend. When I started research for the vampire project half a year later, I felt it could work with the idea if I gave it a make-over. The way it turned out to me was more of a pleasant surprise than a conceptual plan. Regarding the "fuckboy-ness" of the original, I guess the song's success was also partially due to the dynamic between the clingy melody and the cliché, indifferent-rocker-dude vibe of the lyrics. As obnoxious as the original lyrics may be, the song probably would not have worked without that clingy melody, and vice versa. So, even the original is perhaps not that douche after all. In retrospect, I think it perhaps shows us that mutations away from heteronormativity, no matter how faint, are also not restricted to the radical fairies of the underground.

AL:

That is very generous of you!

YXL:

Lol. I don't want to come across as being apolitically polite. I just like to seek contaminations that already occur within the so-called hegemony. Obviously, this doesn't mean to just sit back and keep things the way they are. The song still needs to be remade, and passed on with a dose of venom.

For more information, contact program@e-flux.com.

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Return to **Crashing
into the Future**

Return to **Artist**
Cinemas