



Laurence Rickels

INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE

Nancy Barton

Laurence Rickels' new book The Vampire Lectures, takes the pulse of the undead creatures who haunt our filmic and literary imagination, and digs up an eerie signifier for the occult underside of technological mediation. Introducing Freud and the Frankfurt School to Bram Stoker and Andy Warhol as well as Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the camp cinema of Ed Wood, Rickels charts the overlapping psychic terrain between the

phantoms of vampire lore and the spectre of disembodied communication. Anne Rice, the reigning queen of vampire fiction, has called it "the ultimate book... incredibly rich and thought provoking."

Suspended between transference and telepathy, Rickels' innovative style creates a dense web of associations which mix pop culture and psychoanalytic theory, echoing the spontaneous layering of sound and image in

new video and music. Recalling the interdisciplinary interests of authors such as Adorno or Bataille, Rickels writes extensively for artists' catalogues, and has recently begun to curate exhibitions. His "Art/Journalism" show at Rosamund Felsen gallery was among the most popular and controversial in Los Angeles last season.

With the publication of Aberrations of Mourning and The Case of California, Rickels'

work began to attract the attention of the artworld. The connections drawn in his work between adolescence, technoculture, narcissism, and the death drive, illuminate concerns which have been central to many artists working in the 90s. His forthcoming titles include Acting Out in Groups, the three-part opus, Nazi Psychoanalysis, and The History of Cinema, a study of German filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger.

Nancy Barton: *Where did you first uncover the connection between communications media and the supernatural?*

Laurence Rickel: It was in Freud's writings that I first became aware of an uncanniness shared by occult media and technical media — and Freud was writing right in time to register some of the uncannier mediatic interventions from the telephone on up, or down. Taken together with the mass impact of World War I, the emergence of the new

media were, all down the line, accompanied by a new interest in the occult. Occult societies flourished after the first World War, and were just as eager to get Freud involved with their enterprise as was Hollywood at its end. Earlier in the 19th century, we can see a crude and positive parallel between the advent of the telegraph, and all that poltergeist knocking about that shook the United States and Europe up at that same time. So it seems that we have always registered our

shocked reception of the media in the more ancient zone of occult traditions and legends, and have thus also in a sense reformulated, renewed, and changed, the contours of that occult place.

NB: *Why did you choose the vampire as the central image for this study?*

LR: The vampire, in effect, chose me. Freud refers once to the vampire in *Totem and Taboo* to drive home the occult significance of our first contact with our dead.

When someone close to us, someone we have identified with, dies on us, we project our ambivalence onto the deceased. But because there is a reversal in projection—otherwise the dead would be animated as the mourner, and we could leave the mourning to the dead—the corpse is reanimated as vengeful phantom or vampire out to get us. As with the uncanny, which seems to come at us like an external force and therefore attracts our preemptive strikes, but in fact is already in the home the



place where it was to be forgotten, so undeath is the unwelcome truth about our relationship to death or the dead that we prefer to project onto the screens of occult fantasy. One day I decided to reverse foreground and background, and place at the front of the class the vampire Freud mentions only in passing. In other words, I conjoined PR, the propaganda and group psychology of mass media culture, and thus perhaps began to heal a longstanding split between consumer projection and working with and on the transference. So we started reading a great many works of occult or gothic fiction and a lot of Freud. I was also at the time concerned about the emergence of a new middlebrow sociology or social studies that was starting to fill in the blanks with profound resistance to theory, in particular to psychoanalysis. So I went where the cultural studies people went but kept my Freudian ears on. Psychoanalysis has always been about thinking about the hi and the low of culture, and thereby not surrendering any part of our inheritance to journalism or to the state.

NB: *If the technology of telecommunication extends the reach of the self in forms that mirror psychic phenomena, does the current infiltration of cyberspace into domestic routines suggest any corresponding shifts in the role of the occult?*

LR: From cyberspace to cloning Dolly, gadget love appears to be closing in on multiple consummations. The occult and science-fictional tensions between reproduction and replication — basic to the classic vampire fantasy — seem relieved or tranquilized, just as digital editing seems to have wiped up the castrative conflict between film and video media, and the attendant anxieties about loss of generation. We are back, with gadgets, to the Greek rapport with technology, which was playful and body proportioned, not into the big machines of industry, labor, or division. However, the happier conditions of our current compatibility with the supernatural, and with the trans-, from Transylvania and transvestite to transmission, will have introduced a shift only if life can, through cloning, be separated from death or the dead. For, as long as the other goes first, even or especially in our current cyberspatial setting, we are confirmed both in our own vampiric immortality and in our suicidal devastation, our inability to lose loss. That is the innovation Anne Rice introduces into the vampire legend: vampires struggle to survive their immortality but are doomed by the downer of loss. Just like us, then, Rice's vampires cannot die, they are immortal; but because loss and un-mourning haunt them, they are driven to commit suicide.

NB: *Your writings on technoculture and the death drive have often led to close relationships with artists. Who have you been working with recently?*

LR: Our collaboration in your "cover" series has been particularly hands-on and in our faces. I could think of two more examples of affinity right off the bat. I am currently writing about the work of Katy Schimert, which opens up unidentified spaces for exploration through surprise juxtaposition and fantasy mapping. That's something I try to do in my writing and thinking: remain non-phobically open to the juxtapositions that are out there. That the dead or missing should come up in the wash or watch for what is otherwise under the sun of repression shouldn't surprise anyone. Schimert has been revisiting upon psychoanalysis the perspectives of Antigone, Dracula, and astronaut Armstrong. I have in my own way invited compatible visitations in my writing sessions. Last year Richard Hawkins and I co-taught a class on "Dandies and Vampires/Ghostbusters and Gadget Lovers." Hawkins examines the under-worlds underlying and running our mass culture. But his interest is also specifically in the teen group psychology. This overlap between his art and my writing has invited, in both cases, a following but also, big time, a misunderstanding. There's an obviousness about teen culture that gets libidinally mixed up with the work that would enter, or even intervene in, that same culture at a point of tension between what's only cute, deep and more formal or theoretical concerns that are also already there.

NB: *Where do you see these forces being played out in the next generation of artists?*

LR: Vampirism lets roll a kind of alternative history, a history of projections. These projections have always covered the margin by pushing back, as external orientation, contradictions within sexual identity or interest. This has resulted, always, in the Eastward-bound rebound of the West's advance into new frontiers. The most current Orient of this metabolization of difference in or as orientation — and accordingly a hot bed of new resources of vampire art — belongs to the Pacific Rim. In this spirit I would single out the work

of Sonia Wang and Susan Choi as being on this new cutting edge on which the vampire today cuts its teeth. What's interesting about them is that there's no position of identification or recognition that is open to them. They have to assume both subject and object positions in this constant flux of the trans between cultures, within this kind of multiculture that also doesn't offer any kind of identity or grounding.

NB: *What is the reciprocal relationship between art and theory?*

LP: The art world really took to *The Case of California*. Artists can appreciate that I write every single word. And that kind of art appreciation or gratitude is the beginning of understanding. Of course that "taking to" cannot occur without a relationship. In the 90s I have been responding more and more to contemporary art in catalogue essays. I try to set up a thought experiment which my work and the artists' work can cohabit. That is my gratitude to the artist. Perhaps the best art essay I've written to date is "Silent Reading," my contribution to an exhibition catalogue for Larry Johnson. I wonder if I even mention a single work of his. But the resonance between what my essay gets into and Johnson's work is really unstoppable and irrefutable.

NB: *The Vampire Lectures was originally captured on tape from your live lectures, a process that mirrors the communication technologies you discuss. Did this technique affect the content or style of the book?*

LP: The so-called Western tradition has been maintained throughout modernity by lecture books. Hegel, Freud, Heidegger, Lacan, the list is formidable. *The Vampire Lectures* takes this tradition for the first time to an audience just back from the beach. These lectures, originally for my university students, thus perform in the context of the transference, the juxtapositions I proposed in *The Case of California* — between high and low, Europe and California — while never fully departing, I trust, from the theoretical orbit of psychoanalysis. ■

Nancy Barton is an artist and Director of the Undergraduate Program in Studio Art at New York University. The images in this article are from her series of photos for Laurence Rickels's bookcovers from 1998: Psy-Fi; Aberrations of Mourning; and Nazi Psychoanalysis.