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## Blood-Suckers! The Concepts Revisionist and Anti-revisionist Mythology Introduced by the Vampire- and Werewolf-tetralogy Underworld (2003-2012)

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# Blood-Suckers! The Concepts Revisionist and Anti-revisionist Mythology Introduced by the Vampire- and Werewolf-tetralogy Underworld (2003-2012)

## **Abstract**

By undertaking a structuralist influenced analysis of the vampire- and werewolf-tetralogy *Underworld* the author argues for the usefulness of the concept “revisionist mythology” and “anti-revisionist mythology” in the study of the history of religion in general and in the study of popular mythology in specific. These concepts point to dramaturgical, but also ethical and ideological, changes within the world of commercial pop-mythological artefacts. The article focuses on certain aesthetic aspects of the tetralogy that unveil counter-cultural traits that might be labelled socialist. The article ends with speculations about the causes for the strong revisionistic and anti-revisionistic trends that are taking place in contemporary, popular mythological subcultures.

## **Keywords**

mythology, modernity, revisionism, vampires, werewolves

## **Author Notes**

Stefan Arvidsson is professor at Linnæus University in Sweden. He has published in the field of intellectual history (*Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology between scholarship and ideology*, University of Chicago Press) and his main interest is the survival and development of myth and imagination in the modern era.

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to introduce two concepts that I believe to be useful when describing changes in modern and contemporary mythologies as they emerge in film, computer games, fantasy novels, live action role-playing games, etc. In the innovative *Encyclopaedia of Fantasy* (1997), Paul Kincaid introduces the term "revisionist fantasy" to cover the change that the fantasy genre underwent in the 1970s and 1980s, in relation to the valuations of the inhabitants in the different diegetic worlds. I wish to expand Kincaid's concept by speaking about "revisionist mythology." On the basis of this concept I wish furthermore to argue for the usefulness of an additional concept that I derive from it: "anti-revisionist mythology." An "anti-revisionist mythology" is basically a mythology that restores the characters, plots, valuations and moral of an older, established mythological tradition of narratives. In fact, however, this anti-revisionistic turn is never, as I hope to demonstrate in this article, a simple return to the original mythic story. In my opinion, these two concepts, "revisionist mythology" and "anti-revisionist mythology" are necessary for describing the windings and transformations that myths and myth-like tales have undergone in a culture that, to a large extent, is decided upon by the culture industry's hurried hunt for profit. The fact that the two concepts stands dialectically toward each other ("anti-") indicates how the modern and contemporary imagination, due to the pressure of creating profitable fresh stories, works with replications, reversals and revaluations, rather than innovative new combinations. It is my hope that these concepts will find their way into the study of what I like to think of as the field of pop mythology. Being primarily a scholar of comparative mythology, and neither of film nor popular culture, I believe there exists a need for concepts that span traditional religious narratives as well as stories within popular culture.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I aim to analyse a film tetralogy that turns upside-down certain established codes and values of its genre – a genre where older codes and values once already, from the counterculture heyday of the 1970s, had been turned upside-down. The *Underworld* film tetralogy (2003-2012) makes up a pseudo-historical, fantastic world that builds on an established mythological bestiary consisting of vampires and werewolves. The tales of these bloodthirsty creatures go back to East-European folklore but flourish today, as is well known, within the pop mythology of the cultural industry. The modern history of these shape-shifters is well researched and the allure of the more romantic, modern vampires at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, collectively personified in Count Dracula, can partly be attributed to the bourgeoisie nostalgia for the fading aristocratic world where the defeated aristocracy could be perceived as authentic carriers of non-meritocratic and non-monetary values, and partly to an urge to consolidate bourgeoisie morals in fast changing times.<sup>2</sup> Vampire romances in general express a (prohibited) incitement for the decadent aristocrat and a masochistic desire for submission. At the same time the vampires are suited to represent the upper class as the upper class (according to the critical perspective of the industrious bourgeoisie middle-class) that consists of parasites and exploiters. Vampires are, as is well known, characterised by their abusive consumption.<sup>3</sup>

The pop mythological history of the werewolf is not as spectacular as that of the vampires.<sup>4</sup> While vampire romance is stimulated by a desire for (forbidden) sensuality and (female-identified) masochism, the attraction of the brutish werewolf is presumably built on (prohibited) aggressiveness and (male-identified) sadism. While the pleasure in vampire romance is based on identification with the victim, in the stories of werewolves it is based on identification with the perpetrator. The two shape-shifting races relate thus to one another as Eros to Thanatos.

The image of vampires has undergone a kind of Nietzschean revaluation of all values in the last 35-40 years. The emancipatory counterculture of the 1970s and subsequent postmodern permissive imperative (“Enjoy!”), have led to a radical transformation of these fantastic creatures. The famous Anne Rice novels, *The Vampire Chronicles* (1976-95), underscored the previous, only hinted at, erotic-sensual side of vampires and obscured their lurid, grotesque appearance (for example Count Orlok in the original *Nosferatu* film). This erotic, decadent vampire image, made widespread through Francis Ford Coppola's film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* from 1992, thrives today in film (for example, Catherine Hardwicke's *Twilight* from 2008), live action role-playing game culture, computer and video games, New Age spirituality and interconnected cultural fields. In general terms, one can say that the revisionism of the vampire mythology has meant that it has lost its traditional moral sense that aimed to consolidate bourgeoisie attitudes toward aristocrats, foreigners and female sexuality. In a typically postmodern way aesthetics, that is, the pleasurable and sensuous appearance, now replaces ethics. It is worth noting that the werewolf mythology has not undergone the same metamorphosis - hence no one speaks of "werewolf romance".<sup>5</sup> However, something has happened during the last decade – think of the werewolves in *True Blood* or “Team Jacob” in *Twilight* – that might want us to reconsider that proposition. And below I will give another example of the same revisionist trend.

### **The Structure in Underworld**

Among the vast variety of vampire films, I would like to draw attention to the *Underworld* tetralogy. The first film of the tetralogy is just called *Underworld* (2003). It was directed by Len Wiseman with a screenplay by Daniel McBride based on a story created by the two along with Kevin Grevioux. The film was followed by a sequel entitled *Underworld: Evolution*

(2006), where to a large extent the same people were involved. *Underworld* and *Underworld: Evolution* – and it is primarily these two films that are of interest for the scholarly study of mythology – are both based around a war between vampires and werewolves. They are set, however, in environments that are quite different from each other. The world of *Underworld* is a gothic metropolis (the location of filming was Budapest), while *Underworld: Evolution* is set in an old-fashioned, East-European countryside – Hungary and Transylvania are, of course, classic vampire territory. The films are set in our time, but with interpolated images from the past: *Underworld* contains “memories” from medieval Eastern Europe; *Underworld: Evolution*, on the other hand, contains “actual” historical flashbacks. The main characters and the history of the “races or species” to which these main characters belong, vampires and werewolves, intimately link the two films. In the films the werewolves are referred to as *Lycans* obviously derived from the Greek word *lykanthropos*.

I will, henceforth, speak about the films and their diegetic world simply as *Underworld* (no italics); when I refer to the first film, I will indicate it by writing “the film *Underworld*”. The title refers certainly to “underground” and the land of the dead, but one should also be aware that “underworld” in the world of fantasy, suggests a hidden realm that can be found anywhere, behind any wainscot.<sup>6</sup>

The film *Underworld* begins *in medias res* in the present day and it is only through memories - ordinary memories, but also memories that are transmitted, as the vampires and werewolves consume the elixir of life, from individual to individual through blood– that the underlying story unfolds. The heart of the story turns out to be the “blood feud” between vampires and werewolves. In *Underworld: Evolution* we are given historical flashbacks that explain and enrich information about the conflict. Initially, the beautiful and aristocratic vampires appear as admirable heroes and, thanks to the main character Selene, an amazon, as admirable heroines. While the vampires are elegant and sexy, young and gender-mixed, the

werewolves are presented as coarse bundles of muscles. Their confinement to bodily bestiality is in comparison with the vampires, striking; during the transformation to beast, the werewolves turn completely, while vampires barely turn at all - their transformation only involves the emergence of a pair of delicious fangs. The contrast between the two “races,” or “species,” also concerns human “races”; exclusively white people are cast as the vampires, while black and the occasional latino actors can be found among the werewolves.<sup>7</sup> While the werewolves dwell in the underworld, in sewers and abandoned factories, the vampires live in an elegant “European” castle.<sup>8</sup>

|                              | <b>Element</b>                                 | <b>Location</b>   | <b>Physique</b>                                  | <b>Sex</b>          | <b>Age</b>                      | <b>Race</b>                            | <b>Style (class)</b>   |
|------------------------------|--|---|--|---------------------|---------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Vampires<br/>Bats</b>     | Night,<br>darkness.<br>Air                     | Exotic<br>countries.<br>Castle                                | Slender,<br>accentuated<br>fangs                 | Men<br>and<br>women | Young<br>and old                | White,<br>occasional<br>East<br>Asians | Elegance.<br>Aristocracy.<br>Black “Nazi-<br>coats”.<br>Sacral and<br>sexy<br>decadence.<br>Mercedes-<br>Benz. |
| <b>Werewolves<br/>Wolves</b> | Night,<br>darkness,<br>full moon.<br>Chthonic. | “City’s<br>underbelly”.<br>Sewers,<br>abandoned<br>factories. | Muscular,<br>extreme<br>bodily<br>transformation | Men                 | Young<br>and<br>middle-<br>aged | White,<br>Black,<br>Latino             | Masculine<br>hardness.<br>Shabby.<br>Brown<br>cowboy-<br>trench coats.<br>Truck.                               |

### **Anti-Revisionistic Vampire Mythology**

Since we from the very start of the film *Underworld* encounter vampires that are not only stylish and cool, but also immediately appear as the protagonists of the narrative, we seem to be dealing with a revisionist version of vampire mythology. (But not with a revision of the werewolves because they are in accordance with tradition portrayed as monstrous.) However, during the film *Underworld* it became clear to the spectators - as well as to the main character, the vampire Selene - that this is not the case; it is not the vampires who are the true

heroes of the narrative. The story behind the blood feud between the vampires and the werewolves is indeed rather complex but can be summarised as follows. Sometime during the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Alexander Corvinus became infected by a certain virus that made him immortal.<sup>9</sup> In due time Corvinus became father of three children. An unnamed child gave rise to a lineage consisting of ordinary human beings, but Corvinus also had twins. One of them, Markus, was bitten by a bat and became the first (immortal) vampire. His brother William was bitten by a wolf and became the ancestor of all (immortal) werewolves. This appears to have occurred during the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century. Thereafter vampirism and werewolfism was spread to the victims in the form of a virus.

**IMMORTAL BEING**  
Alexander Corvinus

|                          |  |   |                                |
|--------------------------|--|---|--------------------------------|
| 1st generation           | VAMPIRES<br>Markus Corvinus  | "PURE-BLOODED" BEINGS<br>Anonymous Corvinus             | WEREWOLVES<br>William Corvinus |
| 2nd generation           | Viktor<br>Amelia   |   | Lucian                         |
| Diversity, among them... | Sonja (biological daughter of Viktor)<br>Selene ("blood-daughter" of Viktor) |   | Dr. Singe<br>Raze              |
| Present/future           |  | HYBRIDS<br>Michael Corvin<br>Lucian<br>Markus<br>Selene |                                |

The main characters in *Underworld*. During the film, some of them transform into "hybrids", which happens when "pure" Alexander Corvinus-blood is mixed with the werewolf or vampire virus, or these with each other.<sup>10</sup>

We learn furthermore that the first werewolves were genuine beasts (a truth that in *Underworld: Evolution* is visualised by the hunt for William, the first primeval werewolf) and only later generations managed to intentionally shape-shift between human and animal form. The vampires - no longer led by the primeval vampire Markus, but by the ruthless warlord Viktor, who has voluntarily accepted to be turned into a vampire in order to escape death – succeeds in taming and enslaving the brutal werewolves. This deprivation of the werewolves'

freedom is – the audience as well as Selene find out (especially in the scene 1:36-41 in *Underworld*) - the real cause of the blood feud. Within the framework of *Underworld*'s diegesis, the reason for the feud is thus not relegated to a (meta-)mythical realm ("vampires and werewolves are by nature enemies"). Selene, in the opening scene of film *Underworld*, indeed talks about vampire superiority as a "birth-right," but at that time she is not aware of the true state of affairs. The cause of the feud is instead given a completely profane explanation; oppression and slavery. Vampires appear fittingly as exploiters, bloodsuckers indeed. There is no longer room for flirtation with cool beautiful aristocrats, but rather we witness an "anti-revisionist" development of the vampire legends.

We also learn that the conflict between the vampires and werewolves crystallised itself around a unique incident. The triggering incident in the war between these monsters was when the werewolf Lucian and Sonja, the daughter of the vampire leader Viktor, fell in love - a love that gave rise to a foetus, both vampire and werewolf. This "crossbreeding" is, according to the vampire Viktor, who likes to talk in a sacerdotal idiom, "heresy" and an "abomination." He therefore commands the death of his own daughter and the torturing of Lucian. However, Lucian succeeds in escaping and the blood feud is now at large. The love story between Lucian and Sonja is repeated in the diegetic present through the love between vampire warrior Selene and werewolf hybrid Michael Corvin.

The manifest protagonist of the film, Selene, is not, as could have been suspected from her sexy, "revisionist" appearance, a femme fatale vamp. In comparison with other female vampires, this "death dealer" comes across as rather chaste. When sexual desire is portrayed in *Underworld* it is far from Anne Rice's permissive "play" with sexual feelings and perversions. The most explicit sex scene in the two first films of the series is a scene with the fraudulent vampire, Tanis; a decadent threesome of blood and naked flesh that heralds his prompt and macabre death. Selene, on the other hand, only appears in one sex scene, and it is

the warm-heartedness and caring of Michael (played by Scott Speedman) that turns her on. One could not be further from Rice's "decadent" sinners. Even in the erotic area, *Underworld* thus expresses a revision of revisionism, an anti-revisionism. Other examples of the same transformation could be possible, for example, in that there is no mystical-spiritual element that turns human beings into vampires, but rather a simple virus; an infection spreading like other diseases.<sup>11</sup>

### **Revisionistic Werewolf Mythology**

After this structural mapping and identification of some anti-revisionist elements in the representation of the vampires, let me now draw attention to the image of the other creatures. The first generation of werewolves, it is revealed in *Underworld: Evolution*, was transformed permanently into werewolves and was (if we are to believe the admittedly untrustworthy "historian vampire" Tanis) extremely bloodthirsty and cruel. Over time they seem however to have become increasingly more human. In the mythology of *Underworld*, one still-very-human werewolf in particular plays a prominent role - it could in fact be argued that he is the real, but "latent" protagonist of the entire mythology. Despite having a typical thuggish look, Lucian, whose name indicates that he in a way is the lycan *per se*, is a real hero. He is the leader of the contemporary werewolves but differs from them through "having class". He addresses his howling "pack of wolves" as "gentlemen," says "please" and talks about the importance of having "manners." He tries plain and simply to civilise the wolf people. One might even interpret the use of the word *lycans* - derived as it is from the "scholarly" and "sophisticated" Greek *lykantropi* (from *lykos*, wolf, and *anthropos*, human) - as an argument for the possibility that werewolfism holds the potential for a higher form of life than one in the shape of a wolf. *Lycan* is a word to prefer because "werewolf" essentially evokes bestial

violence. The word could accordingly be perceived as a proud self-description where *lycans* might be related to *werewolves* as, for example, *proletarian* to *wage labourer*, *black* to *nigger* and *dalit* to *pariah*.

In any case, Lucian is the werewolf of your dreams. He is all the things that werewolves have the potential to become, that is to say smart, charming, sexy, and civilised. Around his neck he wears a necklace (which is also half the key to the cage in which the primeval werewolf is imprisoned), which was given to him by his vampire love who was murdered by her own kindred. Lucian, whose love affair with a vampire triggered the war between vampires and werewolves in the first place, speaks with warm affection of the mixing of the bloodlines (for example, in the film *Underworld* 1:20-53). The “racist” discourse on “races” and “species” stems above all from the evil side (Viktor) and Lucian totally opposes this. His defence of the mixing of the bloodlines is at the same time an attempt to demonstrate to the upper-class vampires that the savagery of werewolves lays just at the surface and that they do not deserve to be mistreated. The werewolves, brutal and bloodthirsty as they actually are at present, need to prove this to themselves as well, for example by using the ethnonym “lycans”.

Another counter-example to the notion of the base bestiality of werewolves and the nobility of vampires is the story about the time when the vampire leader Viktor “crept” around and drank horse blood, only to subsequently - through lack of self-discipline, but also as part of a plan directed against the race of werewolves - drink the life out of Selene’s entire family (*Underworld* 1:36-8). “It was he [Viktor] who crept room to room dispatching everyone close to your heart,” a vampire explains to Selene. Viktor commits this deed because of his desire for human blood, but even more so because it serves his struggle to chastise the werewolves - Selene’s father has namely built a secret prison where the primeval werewolf is held prisoner for all time and his death is therefore required. Lucian states plainly

that the blood feud is actually Viktor's deed – "It's his war, Viktor's" (*Underworld* 1:25) – since he killed his own daughter and forced the tormented Lucian to watch his beloved be burned away by the sun's annihilating rays. It is indeed the vampires who are cruel. The stylish and cool are not good guys.

Allow me to give another example of the revisionism of the werewolf mythology. In the underground, the werewolves have built a chthonic medical laboratory that makes the audience of the film think of torture and, not least through the appearance of the werewolf doctor, Nazi experiments. It becomes apparent, however, that the aim of their medical experiments is to find the pure "human" bloodline and by allowing everyone to transform into hybrids, to put an end to the blood feud once and for all. Instead it is the vampires who, in a beautiful fin-de-siècle house in the finer part of the city, have locations in which they carry out torture and execute werewolves. The ugly and scary are not the bad guys. By allowing the good-looking to appear initially, in the film *Underworld*, as the good guys and then later to be revealed as evil and, vice versa, by allowing the unattractive to initially appear as the bad guys and then later as virtuous, the mythology of the film series undermines one of the basic workings of ideology. Aesthetics has, not only in today's postmodern, capitalistic society, but in all societies throughout history, served as the ideological front for ethics: if somebody is ugly, they are wicked; if somebody is beautiful, they are virtuous.<sup>12</sup>

To summarise so far: the mythology that appears in the two first films dissociates itself from the transmitted narratives of the bloodsucking shape-shifters. It is *anti-revisionistic* in relation to the revisionistic vampire romance that has been so strong in pop mythology in recent decades, because if we scratch the surface the vampires do not at all appear as delicious, but unsavoury and evil. The mythology is however revisionistic in relation to werewolves, because if we scratch the surface the werewolves appear as victims possible to civilise and not at all as inherent monsters.

### **The socialism of *Rise of the Lycans***

In the spring of 2009, the third part of *Underworld* was released, *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans*, directed by Patrick Tatopoulos. As the title suggests, this (significantly inferior) film is set in the oldest “medieval” time, the time when the blood feud between the vampires and werewolves had not yet begun. One of the key elements of the film is the Romeo and Juliet motif of the love between the vampire Sonja and the lycan Lucian. Another major plot is the history of how the enslaved lycans become aware of the fact that they are not animals, and how they ultimately revolt. The vampires from the start appear as a corrupt, decadent, racist and greedy upper class that consciously transforms people into lycans in order to exploit them in the mines and as daytime guardians. The vampires, however, are not very vampire-like in this film; no transformations, no bites.

The hero in *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans* is the blacksmith Lucian, a Spartacus of his time who leads the slaves to freedom. From the very start, we are told, Lucian was special; his birth was miraculous as he was the first who, despite the fact that he was infected by the werewolf virus, could recover his human shape. From the earlier films the audience was given the impression that the tale of the original bestiality of werewolves, forever trapped in their eternal werewolf shape, might have been a fabrication invented by the vampires in order to legitimise their authority, but this impression is to some extent put to shame by *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans*. “Lycans” cannot be perceived as “self-conscious werewolves,” at least not on an individual level. However, the lycans are in fact depicted as a higher “species” through their conscious humanity and capacity for rebellion. “We can be slaves - or we can be Lycans!” Lucian shouts. And despite the base bestiality of the hundred-per-cent-werewolves, they do listen to Lucian’s words about rebellion and he himself, though he sometimes speaks

of them as monsters, feels sympathy and compassion for these "beasts." The final scene in *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans* must be described as revolutionary – the fight against the oppression of vampires and for the dignity of the lycans.

The idea that the blood feud between these two mythical races goes back to a "social" conflict of slavery is, as far as I know, innovative. The prelude to *Underworld: Evolution* emphasises the social roots of the conflict: "... a blood feud raged between the ruling class of vampires and a rebellious legion of werewolves known as lycans." Overall, these shifts and metamorphoses almost evoke socialist attitudes – by socialist attitudes I mean attitudes that contest that some people have the moral right to be privileged because they imagine themselves to be, and persuade others that they are, more virtuous than ordinary folks (more diligent, intelligent, innovative, etc.). A quote by the composer Richard Wagner, from his socialist youth, can illuminate the radicalism in the revisionist werewolf mythology:

*Aber er war Mensch,  
und sein Barbarenthum, sein Sklaventhum  
war nicht sein Natur, sondern sein Schicksal,  
die Sünde der Geschichte an seiner Natur.*<sup>13</sup>

*But he was a human  
and the barbaric, the servile  
was not his nature but rather his destiny,  
history's sin against his nature.*

In the last film in the series, *Underworld: Awakening* released in 2012, Selene wakes up after having been sedated for 12 years only to find that a doctor has created a hybrid-child from herself and Michael. The reason for this conception is that Dr. Jacob Lane himself is in fact a lycan and hopes to breed the girl, who is now 12 years old and sexually mature, with his son. His son is naturally also a lycan and Dr. Lane hopes to see a race of super lycans arise. With the help of an honourable police officer and a virtuous vampire, Selene succeeds in stopping this breeding experiment. Thus, the film returns to a revisionist view of the vampires as, basically, heroes, while nothing remains of the politicisation of the werewolves - both "lower

lycans" and the highbrow doctor-werewolves are malicious. The depiction of werewolves is, thus, "classical," "traditional" or "orthodox." Despite the hint of interesting developments of certain themes – in particular "the maternal feelings of a death dealer" - *Underworld: Awakening* has drenched everything of interest from the point of view of the study of pop mythology in a cascade of spastic blinking blue lights, hectic music and gory violence. The imaginary realm of Underworld seems to have exhausted its mythical power.

### **Revisionism and Anti-Revisionism within Pop Mythology**

Within contemporary historical films, it is no longer the envoys of civilisation, noble Romans, brave British soldiers or fast-shooting cowboys, who are depicted as heroes. Instead it is the Barbarians, the authentic Teutons, the nature-integrated Celts/"Red Indians" and the adventurous pirates who are depicted, if not as unpolluted heroes, then as comparatively civilised people. Remember such films as *Dances With Wolves* (1990), *Braveheart* (1995), *Gladiator* (2000), *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003), *The Last Samurai* (2003) and *King Arthur* (2004). These could be called historiographical revisionism. The same tendencies exist within fantastic films: *The Lord of the Rings* is, in ways, already revisionism of the Nibelungen tradition in that J.R.R. Tolkien made the anti-heroic hobbits (alongside the classic "hidden monarchy" Aragorn and the guardian angel, magician Gandalf) his main champions.<sup>14</sup> There exist other genres where this tendency, the tendency for revisionism, might not be present, or at least, is not present as obviously. Revisionism seems to be relatively weak within genres such as horror, action and science fiction.

The term "revisionistic fantasy," coined by Paul Kincaid, should, as his article is trying to demonstrate, be transferred to a greater cultural field. I, therefore, have suggested that we start to use the term "revisionistic mythology."<sup>15</sup> The term is in my understanding

quite suitable because “myth” and “mythology” not only denote tales with fantastic, extraordinary characters, props and plots, but also because “myth” and “mythology” – through studies of myths from Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1926) and Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957) to Bruce Lincoln’s *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (1994) – connote that the tales are coherent with social formations and ideology. As I have endeavoured to demonstrate above, there might also be reasons to talk about “anti-revisionistic mythologies.”

What are the causes of these revisionistic and anti-revisionistic tendencies? An explanation that immediately springs to mind is that these mythological universes quite simply have emptied their narrative possibilities. We are told that in the middle ages one could tell similar stories over and over again, but a profit-seeking cultural industry with a modern audience constantly must come up with something new.<sup>16</sup> Maybe we cannot feature heroic cowboys yet again for the simple reason that the audience knows the plot all too well. One could otherwise look for reasons among the preferences of the directors and screenwriters, but this does not seem fruitful to me because it all too strongly emphasises individuals as autonomous subjects. If it is true, as I suggested above, that revisionistic tendencies are stronger in historical and pseudo-historical pop mythology, this explanation might not be enough; or it needs to be *ad hoc* complemented with a suggestion about why these particular genres undergo revisions. It might be the case that history, pseudo-history and legendary epics function as projection screens for ideology and utopia in a different way than, say, romantic comedies.

The literary theorist Fredric Jameson has, in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), challenged us to simultaneously look for both ideological and utopian aspects in every modern artefact. By this Jameson means that we should identify elements that consolidate social forces and at the same time look for dreams about the future

contained within that artefact. Jameson's suggestion is challenging and fruitful: what do we get if we examine not just the ideological dimension of e.g., Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*, but the utopian; not just the utopian of Milos Forman's *Hair*, but the ideological? I suspect, however, that the proportions between ideology and utopianism might not be divided equally among different genres or between individual artefacts. Presumably, it is not very controversial to state that realistic but heroic Hollywood films about World War II contain large amounts of ideology (American patriotism, "freedom propaganda", etc.) and maybe just a little portion of utopianism (longing for fraternity perhaps). I would suggest that Underworld and similar pop mythological artefacts – oscillating between pseudo-historical legends and imaginative fairylands, a field that can accommodate relatively realistic films such as Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004) and totally fantastic films such as John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) – have a greater ability to absorb utopian energies. Imaginative, fantastic narratives demand a comparatively unrestricted imagination and even though imagination naturally uses material from reality, it freely combines (horse + men = centaur), negates (invisible men = ghost) and extrapolates (beanstalk grows to the sky) elements from reality with the aim to stimulate the senses, the intellect and the will. I would suggest that it is for this reason that revisionistic and anti-revisionistic tendencies are so strong within the cultural field of pop mythology.

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The concepts revisionist and antirevisionist mythology could also be useful in the study of more ancient mythologies, for example when describing the gnostic mandaeen story of Jesus as a deceiver, or the South-Indian upside-down turning of the *Ramayana* epic where Ravana is presented as the hero and Rama as the villain.

<sup>2</sup> Bartlett, W. B. & Idriceanu, Flavia. 2006. *Legends of blood: the vampire in history and myth*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger

<sup>3</sup> In a Swedish dissertation (Höglund, Anna. 2009. *Vampyrer. En kulturkritisk studie av den västerländska vampyrberättelsen från 1700-talet till 2000-talet*. Växjö: Växjö University Press) the theme of the vampires' relation to nourishment is the leading theme. At the University of Chicago, historian of religions Bruce Lincoln

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emphasized vampire consumption habits in his course, "Liminal Beings: Vampires and Other Other", held in 2008.

<sup>4</sup> This is reflected in the fact that research on werewolf mythology is much poorer than that on vampires. Sabine Baring-Gould's classic from 1865 *The Book of the Werewolves* was reprinted in 2008 and there are a couple of encyclopedias and guides to werewolf movies and werewolf literature, which is likely to lead to more research, but the amount is currently nowhere near that on vampires.

<sup>5</sup> David Langford (Werewolves. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, (red) Clute, John & John Grant, London: Orbit, 1997) provides examples that werewolves too have been transformed in the revisionist direction, and one could also remember Laurell K. Hamilton's book about Anita Blake and other urban fantasy stories. But they seems, in any case, to have had limited influence on the overall pop mythological cultural field (spirituality, games, live action role-playing games, etc.).

<sup>6</sup> Clute, John. *Underworld*. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, (red) Clute, John & John Grant, London: Orbit, 1997; and Clute, John. *Wainscots*. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, (red) Clute, John & John Grant, London: Orbit, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> The "intellectual" representative within both "races" differs from the norm. The werewolves' medical doctor is a slender type with big round glasses that brings to mind representations of perverted SS personnel (the Austrian actor Erwin Leder also played the SS officer in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*). The vampires' technical expert Kahn is played by the black British actor Robbie Gee and he is the only Black in the vampire coven. While in the first case this may concern a prejudice (muscular men cannot be intellectuals and a medical doctor cannot look like an alpha werewolf), it is in Kahn's case probably a conscious PC standpoint: it does not look good if there are no blacks among the sophisticated; and then, in an attempt to compensate that shortage, they allow a black person to play the most intelligent vampire of all.

<sup>8</sup> In *Underworld: Evolution* the structure is ruptured in one respect. The arch villain in the film is the primeval vampire Mark, who does not dress like an aristocrat but rather looks like a thuggish werewolf in his worn cowboy trench coat. The reason for this anomaly is probably the need to distinguish Mark from the aristocratic villain from the anterior film *Underworld*. It may be worth noting that his transformation does not involve, like the vampires in the film *Underworld*, just a minor detail (fangs), but rather a total transformation into a batman who most of all brings to mind representations of the bat-winged Satan in the famous illustrations of Gustav Doré.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Corvinus is probably named after the historical king Matthias I Corvinus of Hungary (alongside Transylvania the traditional vampire homeland). The surname is derived from Latin *corvus*, "raven", yet another black animal of the night.

<sup>10</sup> The idea of hybrids, mainly the werewolves' utopia of ending the war between races, is a Nietzschean dream of a supreme race; Selene becomes a hybrid by drinking the blood of the oldest immortal, Alexander, and will therefore be, in Alexander's words, "the future." She becomes even stronger and can withstand sunlight. The survivors of the final battle in *Underworld: Evolution* are hybrids of both Corvinus' "pure" blood and the shape-shifter virus. Michael Corvin is "werewolf dominant", while Selene is "vampire dominant" and the way they kill their opponent reflects these traits: Michael rips the jaw and head of the primeval werewolf William, while Selene allows the primeval vampire Markus to be torn to shreds by the rotating wings of a helicopter.

<sup>11</sup> The general theme of virus and vampirism is not novel, but might be traced back to Richard Matheson's horror fiction *I am Legend* from 1954. In general, the idea of monstrosity as a consequence of virus is a popular method – not at least when it comes to zombie stories – to make the transformation from man to monster intelligible.

<sup>12</sup> In the field of the history of religions I know of no one other than the American historian of religions Bruce Lincoln, who has sophisticatedly discussed this basic truth; see in particular, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (1994) about the maneuvers of the heroes of the Iliad towards the lame and ugly Thersites and the discussion in *Religion, Empire, and Torture: The Case of Achaemenian Persia, with a postscript on Abu Ghraib* (2007) about ancient Iranian torture methods and the degrading and dehumanizing treatment of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison.

<sup>13</sup> Wagner, Richard. "Die Kunst und die Revolution," *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen von Richard Wagner*. Vol. 3. Second edition. Leipzig: S.W. Fritsch, 1887 (1849).

<sup>14</sup> Part of my Swedish book on the modern interpretations and revisions of the Nibelungen tradition, *Draksjukan: Mytiska fantasier hos Tolkien, Wagner och de Vries* (2007), has been published in English (see Arvidsson, Stefan. "Greed and the nature of evil. Tolkien versus Wagner". In *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. Vol. 22, nr 2. 2010).

<sup>15</sup> I am of course aware of the fact that for a historian of religions I use the concept "mythology" in an all too frivolous manner, but when I want to analyze stories that engage in a whole cultural sphere (the world of fantasy literature, TV and computer games, live action role-playing games, spirituality, etc.), the term "fiction" and the likes seem all too "lightweight" – they do not indicate sufficiently the social, political and ideological aspects of the narrative content. Cf. Arvidsson, Stefan. "Recycling Narrations in a Post-Modern Market : Some Questions about Myth Today". In *Rethinking the Space for Religion. New Actors in Central and Southeast Europe on Religion, Authenticity and Belonging*. edited by Catharina Raudvere, Krzysztof Stala and Trine Stauning Willert. 2012.

<sup>16</sup> It is probably an exaggeration that, which the distinguished historian of religions, Jan de Vries argues, "the middeleeuwen [...] werd hot nooit moe van de oude helden tea boren zingen"; "Medieval people ... never tired of listening to the songs of the old heroes" (Vries, Jan de. *Heldenlied en heldensage*. Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1959:240), but it is clear that the demand for, and outlook on, narrative innovation was significantly lower or completely different in the middle ages.

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