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WARM-BLOODED: TRUE BLOOD AND LET THE RIGHT ONE IN

J. M. TYREE DISCOVERS CONCEALED HORRORS AND UNUSUAL INTIMACIES IN THE CURRENT SCREEN VOGUE FOR VAMPIRES

In his now-classic Marxist essay on horror fiction, “The Dialectic of Fear” (*New Left Review*, November–December 1982), Franco Moretti compares *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* vis-à-vis each novel’s complicity with conservative social orders. “Monsters are metaphors,” Moretti writes, and “the vampire is a metaphor for capital,” albeit not a simple one. To Moretti, Count Dracula acts more like a monopoly capitalist than a corrupt Byronic aristocratic. As a foreign presence he threatens England with a new model of life-draining efficiency, but this terrifying vehicle of exploitation is itself destroyed by restorative forces of reaction, tradition, and religious superstition. Stephen King makes a similar point in his 1981 nonfiction study *Danse Macabre*, in which he notes that horror fiction is typically “as conservative as a banker in a three-piece suit.” Indeed, the two classic American authors associated with the horror genre, Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft, were conservative to the point of intolerance.

In the recent spate of youth-culture vampire movies, these political questions about the horror genre remain relevant. They connect the present renaissance to recognizable ancestors such as *Near Dark* and *The Lost Boys*. Both of these 1987 films opened on the same week; both films model their vampire clans as a kind of alternative tribal unit that must either colonize the American family or be destroyed attempting to do so. Both films end their narratives with order restored, but *Near Dark* memorably takes its antisocial energy into a radical zone.

Other productions—the 1977 *Dracula* starring Frank Langella, Joss Whedon’s teenage television epic *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), not to mention spoofs and satires like *Love at First Bite* (1979)—often self-consciously target the old politics of the undead. In Guy Maddin’s take on the genre, *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin’s Diary* (2002), a

filmed version of Bram Stoker’s novel as adapted by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet in 1998, the original story is teased for its sexual and political conservatism. *Dracula*, as revisited by Maddin, is a parable about “polluted blood”—contagious sexual or blood-borne diseases from deviant eastern immigrants. “Fear of the other as regards the beloved,” Maddin says in an interview on the DVD, a tidy summary of sexual politics. Horror expert David J. Skal notes in a documentary accompanying Universal’s *Dracula: The Legacy Collection* that the catchphrase of the 1897 novel—“The blood is the life”—echoes both Leviticus and the advertising motto of a patent remedy for syphilis.

The obvious and transgressive sexuality involved in the vampire subgenre has a tricky political side. Classically, being under the spell of a vampire involves effacement by seduction into an exploitative relationship between an omnisexual seducer and a parade of slave lovers—male and female—who are viewed as both interchangeable parts and as natural resources or blood banks. The homoeroticism of vampires, on the other hand, is as longstanding as it is problematic. In a key scene at the start of Tod Browning’s 1931 *Dracula*, Bela Lugosi banishes his three female vampire companions so that he can feast on Jonathan Harker’s blood himself, after an evening of male-on-male mesmerism. (In the Spanish version of *Dracula*, filmed at night on the same set with a completely different cast, this scene replays without the banishment of the women, helping launch a mini-genre of raunchy Mexican female vampires, a B-picture tradition exploited later by Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino in 1996’s *From Dusk Till Dawn*.) The way a victim gets “unclean” from a vampire bite involves illicit intimacy, and these pictures run the gamut of marginalized sex acts contained in the political unconscious: premarital hook-ups, gay and bisexual relationships, adultery, cheating, polygamy, S&M, the sexuality of children, and the hovering specter of quasi-willing sexual violence. A genre featuring centuries-old characters attacking

very young women sometimes clumsily evokes pedophilia—what is Edward Cullen (Robert Pattinson), mall-friendly hero of the teen blockbuster *Twilight* (2008), doing in a high school anyway?

In her 1995 study *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (University of Chicago Press), Nina Auerbach says that each age “gets the vampire it deserves.” Such a claim begs certain questions about our own age and its vampires in two other, rather more compelling 2008 screen fictions: the sad-eyed Eli (Lina Leandersson) in Tomas Alfredson’s *Let the Right One In*, and the dashing Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer) in HBO’s hit series *True Blood*. They make up, together with Edward, a trio that prefers to help rather than hurt the person who is supposed to be their prey—although this reversal is not wholly new (*Near Dark* depicts similar behavior to great effect). If they’re not busy saving their human pals from other vampires, they can act as protectors against scary forms of human male attention. Edward, Bill, and Eli embody a new combination of undead chum and unnaturally attentive lover, a sort of guardian angel with fangs. All three remain willing to “wait for the right moment” rather than forcing the issue of sexual congress. And none wishes to make more vampires—they know what a drag it is not getting old.

Edward is the perfect gentleman. He struggles successfully to resist smoldering jailbait come-ons, and he can move at lightning speed from driving a car to opening its passenger door for his date. Bill is literally an old-school Southern gent—his good manners derive from his upbringing in Antebellum Louisiana. You can definitely bring him home to granny. Even Eli makes for a useful, if homicidal, ally in a case of school bullying. Plus she’s a whiz at the Rubik’s Cube. Does the new vampire, then, have the potential to stand in as a metaphor for our age’s fantasies of non-exploitative tolerance and relatively equitable love relationships? The conservatism identified by Moretti and King satisfies as an assay of *Twilight*, but *True Blood* and *Let the Right One In* are more multifaceted.

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Film scholar Adam Lowenstein argues in *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (Columbia University Press, 2005) that horror pictures can display “allegorical moments” in which historical traumas are confronted in weird and surprising ways. *True Blood* positions itself as a loose but obvious allegory about the mainstream acceptance of so-called “alternative lifestyles”—it’s about tolerance and integration of many kinds, using the vitriolic American debate over gay marriage as a touchstone, while linking it with the Southern reaction against civil rights. The first season involves Bill’s attempt to

“mainstream” in Bon Temps, an undead-unfriendly small town in Louisiana. The action centers on protagonist Sookie Stackhouse (Anna Paquin), a plucky mind-reading waitress who falls in love with Bill at a time when vampires are being lynched. The semi-futuristic setting involves a world in which the development of artificial blood by scientists has allowed vampires to come “out of the coffin” and assimilate into society as “Vampire Americans.” The opening page of Charlaine Harris’s 2001 novel *Dead Until Dark*, on which the first season is based (season 2 draws from the follow-up novel *Living Dead in Dallas*), delivers up a semi-spoofed version of liberal identity politics. Sookie’s jaunty voice asks, “We had all the other minorities in our little town—why not the newest, the legally recognized undead?” In season 1, Bon Temps looks on as Vermont legalizes vampire–human marriages.

“A minority element if there ever was one,” vampires “are prejudiced against,” wrote Richard Matheson in his 1954 novel *I Am Legend*, the source material for the Charlton Heston vehicle, *The Omega Man* (1971). “All he does is drink blood . . . but would you let your sister marry one?” *True Blood* contains its share of a similarly winking tone, including a send-up of Bill’s love of Cambodian pop music, renditions of the voicemail greeting on his cell phone, and a depiction of his pastime of playing Wii golf with his vampire buddies on the Pebble Beach course. When a fellow “life-challenged” chap, Eric Northman (Alexander Skarsgård) complains to Bill—“I texted you three times!”—old-fashioned Bill is forced to admit that he just can’t get his head around the idea of using the number keys as letters to type. “I promised your grandmother,” Bill tells Sookie apropos of a visit to a vampire nightclub, “that no harm would come to you at Fangtasia tonight.” This courtliness is both silly and hot, in a “Yes, Ma’am,” country music kind of way. But while *Twilight* is free abstinence-until-marriage advertising for conservative American family values, *True Blood* is more akin to the menu of late-night cable.

True Blood owes something to the Anne Rice/Neil Jordan vision of *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), especially the bayou mansion settings and the sexed-up vamping of Southern aristocrats. *True Blood* also contains a crossover element of B-movie softcore, and it shares Rice’s embrace of gay relationships and open bisexuality among vampires. The show often has the flavor of a pole-dancing kit bought at a “sex positive” boutique for private, monogamous use, like the tame, bisexual S&M of *Interview with the Vampire*. *True Blood* wears its sexual liberalism on its sleeve. The resistance movement to vampire rights is formed out of the ideological dregs of fundamentalist Christianity—“God hates fangs,” reads a sign in the credits. The fake commercials and vampire-rights

TRUE BLOOD: FROM COMEDY TO HORROR



True Blood: The Complete First Season. © 2009 Home Box Office. DVD: HBO Home Entertainment.

campaign spots included in the DVD extras are wittier than the show itself. Admittedly, *True Blood*'s tones often clash, using the vocabulary of gay rights to serve a central heterosexual love affair, although probably the show desires a more universal view of civil rights. With its emphasis on Bill's mainstreaming, *True Blood*, like creator Alan Ball's previous series, *Six Feet Under*, might be accused of a certain type of gay-friendly conservatism—the vampires who reject assimilation are rather nasty. But the allegory is loose enough to contain paradoxes and contradictions. There's violence and anger among the marginalized population, although the prime source of evil in season 1 is a human serial murderer (Rene Lenier, played by Michael Raymond-James). At its most complex, the show focuses on the dynamic gay character of Lafayette Reynolds (Nelsan Ellis), an unpredictable, irrepressible, and impish figure, a short-order cook, male prostitute, and drug dealer whose disruptive intelligence upends any neat parable of assimilation.

The provocative credit sequence of *True Blood* presents a disturbing mixture of predatory sex and violence that exists at odds with the show's liberalism and suggests a desire to pursue darker storylines. It's reminiscent of the herky-jerky scene at the beginning of Tony Scott's *The Hunger* (1983), with its intercutting of a monkey attack. Even at full speed, the naked eye senses something amiss in the *True Blood* credit sequence among the legible images of smeared road kill, striking snakes, closing Venus' flytraps, children in Klan costumes. *True Blood*'s credits show don't-blink sequences of contorted naked bodies doing unclear but unsettling things, each of which is preceded by an arty dash of blood that appears splattered across the viewfinder, as though the filmmaker was on hand. A tidy précis for the show: during the credits, the viewer assimilates intertwining images of sex and violence before inviting *True Blood*'s vampires into the home. The credits' abbreviated menace anticipates a series of creepy tableaux of violence that swirl uneasily in the stew of *True Blood*. Sookie is able to return to work with implausible soap-opera-logic alacrity after witnessing the aftermath of her grandmother's brutal murder in her home. We must credit Sookie, who is somewhat in the Sarah Michelle Gellar mold (although less kick-ass), with the same kind of moxie that caused Buffy's mom to call her "brave, resourceful, and kind to others in a crisis." Some viewers might feel more traumatized than the character by the vision of that blood-soaked floor—or must this gut reaction be suppressed as an "inappropriately" prim response? This scene and more than a few others like it—a female vampire feeding on the head of a human at Fangtasia, for example—don't have the same feeling of enjoyably gory and even comical "chill" brought

on by Sam Raimi's *Drag Me to Hell* (2009). This is something different, and it's not particularly uncanny—it's horrifying rather than terrifying.

The horror only becomes fully fledged in the later episodes of season 1, when Sookie's brother Jason (Ryan Kwanten) and his sociopathic vegan girlfriend, Amy Burley (Lizzy Caplan), kidnap, tap, and finally kill a kindly older gay vampire, Eddie Gauthier (Stephen Root). Vampire Eddie's tortured cries from his basement prison intermingle with sex scenes in which the couple trip through a hallucinogenic sensual world after taking V, the druggie nickname for vampire blood, for humans a sort of magic-mushroom Viagra. Here, the tones of the show become darkly dissonant. Is the viewer supposed to bliss out with the couple and recognize the vampire's subhuman or ex-human status? Eddie is one of the most sympathetic characters in the whole season. Things get murky here—and interesting. As when a vampire hideout is firebombed, leading to the production of charred and oozing coffins, when Eddie is killed, *True Blood* manages to broach an unusual kind of horror, that inflicted on and not by vampires.

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"We still have our fangs," says one of predatory aristocrats in Ingmar Bergman's *The Hour of the Wolf* (1968). Can the same be said of the contemporary vampire picture? As counterpoints to the perennially resurrected big-budget vampire extravaganza, like Francis Ford Coppola's overreaching *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), more compelling figures in the last three decades arguably spring from bargain productions like George A. Romero's *Martin* (1977), *Near Dark*, and Guillermo del Toro's first film, *Cronos* (1993). These three films share a kind of dirty realism in common with *Let the Right One In*, a film which relies on austerity and a stripped-down language of visual information drawn from ordinary life. Its vampire, the eternally twelve-year-old Eli, is convincingly lonely, retaining childlike sensibilities. "Don't you get any birthday presents?" Oskar (Kare Hedebrant), her temporarily twelve-year-old playmate, asks—and Eli is ashamed to answer "no." Some of the film's memorable images are shots of its characters pictured in the architecturally odd setting, a suburban Swedish housing development outside Stockholm. Alfredson's interview on the DVD makes clear his keen interest in the look and feel of the public square of this housing development during the 1980s: the socialist concrete look in winter, which Alfredson calls "halfway behind the Iron Curtain." The camera pauses in school staircases, hospital corridors, swimming-pool locker rooms and the flat, frozen exteriors of lifeless-looking apartments. (In important ways, the film resonates with the bleak location



Love in a cold climate

Let the Right One In. © 2008 ETI. DVD: Magnolia Home Entertainment.

shooting of *Near Dark*.) It's a banality that gradually turns eerie, the Nanny State as empty nest. "It's very Swedish," Alfredson says.

The baroque excesses in the novel by John Ajvide Lindqvist on which it is based have been carefully excised. Some critical confusion attended the release of *Let the Right One In*, in part because of a decision to remove the back story of the novel, which features flashbacks to Eli's origin as a vampire. In the film, Eli explains that she's been twelve for a long time, and one brief shot reveals what she means when she says that she's "not a girl." The book relates the castration of Eli, called "Elias" two centuries prior, at the hands of a sadistic vampire. In the film, Eli moves into the estate with a male companion that some mistook for her father, but who is in fact a lover whose pedophilia takes an even-more-monstrous turn in the second half of the novel.

The term "realism" is perhaps an odd one to suggest adding to the description of a vampire film, and certainly *Let the Right One In* has its share of camp gross-outs. But it is up to something else as well, resting on a simple premise—what if a vampire boy who has adopted the persona of a vulnerable twelve-year-old girl moved in to the less glamorous suburbs of Stockholm in 1982 and there fell in love with a human twelve-year-old boy who is being violently bullied at school? The core of the film involves such simple and memorable conceits as a tender moment between Oskar and his mom

when they are brushing their teeth together, Oskar sniffing and wearing his dad's red sweater, Eli's bare feet padding in the snow, plus the budding affair over a Rubik's Cube and a little shy dancing in front of mom's turntable. One deleted scene has the lovers teasingly baring fangs to one another as a form of harmless love play. Shots linger on their hands touching or about to touch, the film's replacement for the prurience of the genre, which it studiously avoids.

Despite Eli's best efforts to drive him away, Oskar appears ready to replace Eli's older lover after Eli saves Oskar's life from bullies at a swimming pool. Before that, Oskar saves Eli's life from a would-be attacker who has discovered her pathetic little bathroom nest. After aiding and abetting Eli's feeding for the first time, Oskar is panicked, but he doesn't mind a grateful kiss from her bloody lips as they stand over the murdered corpse. (In a touch characteristic of the film's subtlety, he plays with his toy cars afterwards when he's alone in his room.) Oskar's own homicidal tendencies are hinted at in the film and emphasized in the novel. "Sure," Oskar replies in the book when Eli asks him if he would kill someone if he could be certain of getting away with it. (The film makes this more ambiguous: "You'd murder if you could, to get revenge, right?") So it's clearly possible to read the ending of the film as an inverted but sincere into-the-sunset romance. Oskar travels by train to parts unknown while exchanging Morse Code messages with Eli through the lid of a cardboard



Vampire heritage

Top: *Vampyr*. © 1932 Danish Film Institute. DVD: Criterion Collection. Bottom left: *Let the Right One In*. © 2008 ETI. DVD: Magnolia Home Entertainment. Bottom right: *True Blood: The Complete First Season*. © 2009 Home Box Office. DVD: HBO Home Entertainment.

box—so this is a pair of escaped lovers headed into an uncertain future. The film's premise builds up carefully through small gestures: they care for each other very deeply, each has saved the other's life, and they are bound by a kiss in blood. "To me it's a happy ending," Alfredson says. Or maybe just a case of mutual compatibility?

"I'm nothing," Eli explains in the novel. "Not a child. Not old. Not a boy. Not a girl. Nothing." Oskar's reply shows his remarkably single-minded devotion: "Will you go out with me or not?" Eli's declared and actual lack of gender is very different from the forced denial of unbearable urges by Edward in *Twilight*, although both remain chaste for the moment. Her relationship with Oskar brings to mind the female vampires that form a minor alternative tradition of their own, stretching back from *Interview with the Vampire* to *The Hunger* and ultimately back to Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), with its loosely adapted source material in

Sheridan LeFanu's 1872 lesbian vampire story *Carmilla*. The *Dracula* strand of the myth remains so dominant in film and literature that Stoker was trotted out in notices of *Let the Right One In*. In fact, the two works can only be usefully compared by inversion. The ruined castle becomes an apartment block with cheap fixtures, the rain-lashed ship headed for Whitby becomes a taxi moving through heavy snow, the vampire's coffin resting place becomes a bathroom spot beneath a covered window, like the child vampire's hideaway in *Near Dark*. In *Carmilla*, however, it is possible to detect intriguing points of overlap. Both stories begin when a young motherless girl moves into a new house and starts an all-consuming "friendship" with another young person living there. "Your looks won me," LeFanu writes, in a passage that could describe the chaste love scenes between Eli and Oskar. "I climbed on the bed and put my arms about you, and I think we both fell asleep."

♦♦

LeFanu remarks of Carmilla's victim in her isolated home: "How great an event the introduction of a new friend is, in such solitude." (One chill in Stoker involves the way Count Dracula uses the word "friend" interchangeably to refer to English people and English books.) Vampires, and those who have dealings with them, have a deeply ingrained lonely status, whether it's Count Dracula forcing his way into English society, Buffy amid the castes and schedules of Sunnydale High, the isolated artist and his wife at the center of *The Hour of the Wolf*, the lost wanderer, Allan Grey (Julian West) in *Vampyr*, or Jesus Gris (Federico Luppi), who, after turning vampire in *Cronos*, says, "I feel like I don't belong at all."

A vampire as often as not starts off as a fast friend of a younger person in deep distress about their hopes for love or lasting affection from the living—in *Let the Right One In*, *True Blood*, and *Twilight*, vampires appear among a series of desperate, lonely, trapped, bored, or isolated dreamy younger persons. The traditional vampire is a false friend, the one whose magnetic personality and all-absorbing attentiveness turn out too good to be true, leading to an even lonelier place filled with life-draining abuse and manipulation. The "cruel love" described in *Carmilla* records the perennial sense of early vampirism at the hands of a ravishing older lover who appears cold to the touch and dead of human sympathy at a critical moment. When this effect is cooked up sufficiently with an added comic sensibility, the results can be effective, as in the long course of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

But this pattern of seduction and betrayal is not all that goes on in the latest incarnation of the vampire myth—in fact, rather the opposite is the case. Against enemies living or undead, Edward, Bill, and Eli will defend the fragile bodies of their younger living lovers, and their reasons for doing so go beyond a vested interest in having self-replenishing bags of fresh blood around for themselves. They aren't false friends. What they truly desire most is something very different—they wish for an end to their interminable loneliness. In this they hearken back to the sorrows of Bela Lugosi ("There are far worse things awaiting man than death") and Klaus Kinski ("It's more cruel not to be able to die") in Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu: Phantom of the Night* (1979).

At times there is a striking pathos about these new vampires and their sad plight. *True Blood* and *Let the Right One In* add genuinely creepy and transgressive elements to the vampire canon, while *Twilight* adds only humorlessness. But in one striking respect all three productions add an element of domestication, perhaps bringing them into the orbit of Moretti's account of *Dracula*'s conservatism. What happens when the vampire you're seeing no longer threatens your life?



Domestication

Top: *Let the Right One In*. © 2008 EFTI. DVD: Magnolia Home Entertainment. Bottom: *True Blood: The Complete First Season*. © 2009 Home Box Office. DVD: HBO Home Entertainment.

Such is the case in Matheson's *I Am Legend*, which features the protagonist's mocking pity for the children of the night: "Pore vampires," he thinks as he contemplates them surrounding his safe house, "pore little cusses, pussyfootin' round my house, so thirsty, so all forlorn." As it happens, none of the three newer vampires needs the blood of their chosen lover to live at all. Edward and his family, in a cheap dodge, feed from animals—perhaps that's what lends them their odd pallor, which goes unnoticed by the townsfolk where they live. Oskar, we presume, might well enjoy or at least tolerate the fetching of blood for Eli from somewhere or other; whether the charm will wear thin in time remains open to question, but isn't something of the same true in all love relationships? As for Bill Compton, he enjoys the pleasures of Sookie Stackhouse's neck as much as she enjoys his fangs, but he gets his sustenance out of a bottle.

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ABSTRACT An essay about the 2008 vampire boom, from the bland teen favorite *Twilight* to, more notably, *Let the Right One In* (which combines "dirty realism" with a misfit love story) and the TV series *True Blood* (whose liberal politics of tolerance for minorities opens up to less easily classifiable forms of sex and violence).

KEYWORDS *Twilight*, *Let the Right One In*, *True Blood*, vampire films, horror films

DVD DATA *Let the Right One In*. Director: Tomas Alfredson. © 2008 EFTI. Publisher: Magnolia Home Entertainment. \$26.98, 1 disc.

True Blood: The Complete First Season. Various directors, including Alan Ball. © 2009 Home Box Office. Publisher: HBO Home Entertainment. \$59.99, 5 discs.