

By Mourning's Light

LAURENCE A. RICKELS ON *TRUE BLOOD*

AROUND TEN YEARS AGO, I noticed that the vampires were changing. Whereas bloodsucking had been routinely interpreted in the earlier era as a metaphor for genital sexuality (which I always felt missed the points of the encounter), the vampire fictions themselves now began to flesh or flush out the pre-Oedipal blood bond with the fully sexual bodies of our undead neighbors—for example, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Blade* (1998). This normativization of the vampire was attended by narratives of race and class, whether as the total war between pureblood and merely “turned” vampires (in *Blade*) or the same conflict via the detour of the werewolf, now the vampire’s excluded double. To the extent that the werewolf figured at all in vampire fictions in the pre-*Buffy* days, he was the revenant’s familiar, or the metamorphic guise a vampire could assume to maintain mobility while stuck in the coffin during daytime programming. That was then. Now if you show me a vampire you have to show me the local disgruntled werewolf or shape-shifter, too. Indeed, we were soon instructed (in *Underworld* [2003] and its sequels) that the lycan-

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thrope was, in the beginning, the vampire’s twin rather than his “subhuman”—the latter the guilty assumption whereby the snarliest vampires willfully maintained a false sense of superiority.

That vampires can be “vegetarian” in regard to their bloodlust—as in *Twilight*—an idea retained in *True Blood* as a hick, I mean hickey accessory of genital sex with mortals—is a hope as old as the era we remember as the 1980s, when the sexual revolution had really spread itself thin. In the movies from that era, at

least those playing in New York or on the West Coast, everyone spoke “camp,” the idiolect of unprotected experimentation. But then there was AIDS, which changed everything (albeit in stages, like the stages of grief). In *Dead Until Dark*, the 2001 novel by Charlaine Harris on which the first season of *True Blood* is largely based—the second season just wrapped up on HBO—the narrative loses the momentum of first contact after mortal Sookie (Anna Paquin in the series) and her vampire boyfriend,

Bill (Stephen Mayer), start having regular sex. By the second novel, when Harris begins to borrow from the fantasy genre (maenads and dragons), she is already at the last resort of reader stimulation. Now that vampires are real, as we are taught, all other fictional figures press for realization. And yet the occult and fantasy genres are as different as necromancy and Christianity. It is true that both raise the questions, Where do the dead go? Where are they kept? When the genres are brought together, however, Christianity tends to guide necromancy into the light—the unbearable outcome of most ghost movies, from *Poltergeist* all the way to *The Sixth Sense*. We found ourselves headed off at this impasse watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. When, in season 6, Buffy was in deep despair over her return to life from heaven, even wearing shades couldn’t save the show from its own apocalypse.

What *True Blood* adds to Harris’s novels is the far greater development of the African-American contingent, beginning with Sookie’s BFF, Tara (Rutina Wesley), whose cousin Lafayette (Nelsan Ellis) occupies the hub where black, gay, and vampire rights meet and cross over. The mortals know that once you go



True Blood, 2008—, still from a television show on HBO. From left: Pam (Kristin Bauer), Eric Northman (Alexander Skarsgård), Chow (Patrick Gallagher).

vampire, there’s no going back. For the vampires it’s “out of the coffin”—into the desire. Vampires who don’t integrate or “mainstream,” but remain in “nests” with their own, become, as consumers of sex, flamboyant, outrageous, and apparently disposable. No one likes a Miami Bitch vampire.

The greatest contribution of the African-American figures is their resistance to the fictional world suspended between occult and fantasy genres, which, paradoxically perhaps, gives that world traction and reality effect. I remember listening to a hip-hop station while driving around in LA the day one of the newer *Star Wars* films opened. The host, no doubt preaching to the laugh track, kept asking his phone-in listeners what their plans were for seeing the movie, and each time he drew a blank. Immunity to complete vampirism, which was the big idea behind *Blade*, is rephrased in *True Blood* as a fact of everyday life—reminding me that only the African-American vote was not “glamoured” by Ronald Reagan. Our mass psychology registers or installs this resistance as dissociation, like that of Tara at a meeting of Confederate progeny, the Descendants of the Glorious Dead. She



True Blood, 2008—, stills from a television show on HBO. From top: Jason Stackhouse (center, Ryan Kwanten); Tara Thornton (Rutina Wesley).

bears even in name the burden of dissociation American popular culture maintains by the prominent placement in its canon of *Gone with the Wind*.

Cable TV's peculiar inversion of censorship—its perpetual bacchanal of compulsive nudity and sex—forces the glamour of vampirism to show its hand in symptom formations of pathogenic identification and desublimation. Our affair with vampirism is a condition of our trauma survival. The sexual body in our faces during the first season of *True Blood* belonged to Sookie's brother Jason (Ryan Kwanten), who, underneath or above it all, is the splitting, I mean spitting image of George W. Bush. Tara, who, as we might say in family systems therapy, is the identified patient of the show's first season, has had a thing for Jason since childhood. But then she starts exorcising the demons in her relationship to her mother—the relationship that determines, in her case, her pattern of falling for the wrong man. In the second season, Jason converts from wild '80s-style hedonism to rigid Christianity—the Christian right being dedicated in this fictional world to the killing of the dead (or undead).

"Eight years later," more or less, the era when the big screen was dominated by zombies already seems remote. We enjoyed surviving by killing them. But now, when there is hope again, we are prepared to project our vampires. During those eight years, new variations on "psycho" horror slouched toward the screen to be borne. Even after film therapy had, circa the 1990s, busted the decades-long *Psycho* effect—the Hitchcock shower scene that the slasher metabolism worked through—there was still the position of the psycho to face at close quarters as our double. The psycho position, though situated on a sliding scale between psychosis and psychopathy, is neither infernal abandonment of inhibition nor vampiric melancholia. *Psycho* entered the American language as a pop moniker for the psychological casualty of World War II. While psycho horror films may be metonymic of real crime, beginning with the case of Ed Gein, they also refer to mutative changes in the norm that were first identified in the lab space of modern war. We had to face it; now we can.

With the introduction of Jason's true love, Amy (Lizzy Caplan), a vampire-blood addict who kidnaps an undead local to feed her habit, *True Blood* makes an intervention that goes beyond the teen or group therapy of *Buffy* (which, before the fateful conversion to Christianity, hitched its following to the group dynamic coursing through slasher horror from *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* through *Scream*). Amy's vampire victim aptly identifies her as a "psychopath" in spite of all the paraphernalia of political correctness, the whole legacy of the '60s, which she just as aptly rallies to her own defense, pointing out that she rebuilt the economic infrastructure in a third-world village, saving many lives, and that she's vegan—not just, one might quip, vegetarian.

D. W. Winnicott began making the psycho transitionally legible in case studies with children he nipped as budding psychopaths at the onset of their "anti-social tendencies." His signature intervention was to characterize the initial "nuisance behaviour" as an expression of "hope" that illuminates the "importance of the environment." The etymology of *hope* includes

in the word's Germanic prehistory (preserved to this day, as *verhoffen*, in the German "language of hunters") some of the senses Winnicott pursued with his clients at great length. In a word, hope can begin as the startle response to a sudden change in our environment; whereby we, humans and animals alike, take the moment of hesitation to try out in our minds a new next move. For Freud, this ability to reconsider a plan of action as trial offer was the crux of what he called reality testing, which is also what we call thinking, but which is most pressing in the work of mourning. As with original hoping, in mourning we test, in and beyond the interruption that loss brings, a new frontier between life and death.

The question remains, Why admit the vampire as real only to lose him in the crowd of all the other un-majorities?

One day not so long ago the copy shop nearest you started offering as a new service the supersizing of photographs. For birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries, among any number of special events for friends and family, images of those celebrated began to be presented on large posters. Once deregulated (and, Adorno might add, desublimated), the only size that counts is life-size. And it comes as no surprise that these services would be extended, in the end, to remembrance of the dead. "Flat Daddies" and "Flat Mommies," the life-size posters of US soldiers deployed in the Iraq war, help the family members back home reserve a place for a loved one and thus cope with the absence. The simulacrum doesn't only sit in front of the TV or at the table but accompanies the family in the car and is present at all the station stops of everyday life. It goes without saying—literally so on the official product website—that when a condition of long-distance separation more permanent than deployment befalls the loved one, the survivors will be in the ready position to carry around their posters like Nosferatu his coffin. I was wondering how *True Blood* would get around the fact of life that a vampire is dead. But this time, I was missing the point. In episode 10, when Sookie laments out loud that she really wishes that Bill were there, Terry (Todd Lowe), the local vet back from Iraq with PTSD, responds that he understands her well: "There are some dead people I wish were still around too." Fangs *are* for the memories. □

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