



Felicitas Schott

The Undead Among Us

The Figure of the Vampire as
the *Unknown Other* and
Its Representation in *True Blood*



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1 Introduction – Why Vampires Matter

Vampires represent something to us as humans. They represent our fears and our desires. The reason they have recurred in our stories over the last hundred years is that vampires are rich enough a metaphor to adapt to culture's changing worldview and interests. We can make a vampire mean what we want it to mean.

- Susannah Clements (4-5)

Drakul. Nosferatu. Upyr. Vampyre. There have been many names for what we know today as the vampire. It is believed that the existence of vampires goes back in time for almost one thousand years. At least since Bram Stoker's successful novel *Dracula* from 1897, almost everyone is familiar with the image of the walking undead that creeps out of its coffin at night and sucks the blood out of humans. Today's American popular culture makes it even inevitable not to be faced with vampires on television, in advertisement, or even in educational programs for children.

The undead has always been appealing to viewers, especially of the horror and fantasy genre. Zombies, ghosts, demons, mummies, and vampires have been present in movies and on television ever since the invention of the motion picture at the turn of the twentieth century. It is the "otherness" of such monsters, their frightful darkness and exoticism that makes them so interesting. Since F.W. Murnau's masterpiece *Nosferatu* from 1922, it is no longer possible to imagine cinema and television without these nocturnal creatures. Particularly since the turn of the twenty-first century, a striking popularity of the undead figure of the vampire in American popular culture is notable.

The vampire has always been serving as a metaphor for something strange, for anxieties and hidden desires in society. What it has in common with other undead figures in American popular culture is its representation as a monster. The vampires' "otherness", their mystical darkness, hypnotizing men, seducing women, longing for life and its taste for human blood – that is what makes the figure of the vampire so extraordinarily fascinating and engaging to today's movie and television audience.

This book deals with the figure of the vampire regarded as the "unknown other" and how it is fictionally represented in the American TV series *True Blood* (2008 -). HBO's *True Blood* depicts a society in which vampires coexist with humans as well as with

other “supernatural” creatures such as werewolves, mind readers, witches, and shape shifters.

This study focuses on the figure of the vampire. It attempts to examine the fictional character of the vampire as it is represented in the series with particular attention on the concept of the “unknown other”. Questions such as ‘Why is the fictional undead so appealing to the audience?’ and ‘What makes the figure of the vampire particularly engaging to the viewer?’ shall be considered. Primarily, the book will examine how the vampire is depicted in the series, if and how it is different from fictional humanity, as well as in how far the figure of the vampire has transformed compared to its representations in nineteenth and twentieth century popular culture. Working with the hypothesis that the fictional vampire is not a “monster” anymore, it shall be analyzed what happens to the undead when it coexists with humanity. It is presumed that the more the vampire longs for life and assimilates itself in human society, the more human it becomes itself, which leads to the loss of the image of the frightful monster it used to be. As an undead that disrupts the boundaries between the self and the other, the figure of the vampire can be regarded as an ambivalent figure walking on the thin line between life and death, as well as between human and inhuman. At the beginning of the book, different approaches of “otherness” as well as of the “unknown other” will be provided as an overview.

Considering concepts by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, among others, this background chapter serves as a basis for the discussion and analysis of the TV series. Ensuing, the study will provide a brief overview of the vampire myth as well as the fictional representation of the vampire in American popular culture in particular, which shall function as a comparable foundation to work with in the analysis part of the book. The main part of this study is formed by the analysis of the TV series *True Blood*¹ with a focus on the fictional representation of the undead, and in particular the figure of the vampire, regarded as the “unknown other”, whereby several extracts of the series’ episodes will be considered in depth.

¹ This book focuses on the first and the second season of *True Blood* in particular, as season three and four were not available in Germany by this time.

2 The Unknown Other – Fright and Fascination of the Monster

2.1 The Other, the Self, and the Uncanny

Dealing with the other of both individuals and groups, as well as the contact with foreign environments and the imagination of the other, have been examined by many academics in various fields such as philosophy, sociology, political science, theology, and anthropology (cf. Janz 7). In addition, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and cultural studies attempt to define where the notion of the other descends from, what it expresses, and why it is both shocking and fascinating. The idea of the unknown other was first philosophically examined by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. In his work *The Science of Logic* (1812/1813) Hegel outlines that the entity is always something opposing; something or someone can only be conceived if it is distinguishable from the other (cf. Hegel 98).

The term of the so called other can describe many different phenomena. In English there are several words describing what in German is expressed by the single word “fremd”: foreign, strange, different, extrinsic, other, alien. All these adjectives signify what this book refers to as the “unknown other”. According to The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (1995), “other” always goes along with something or someone different or remaining in a group. That definition already implies that the other is closely connected to the self. In order to be able to identify what is other, it is necessary to define the self. Being aware of their own identity and characteristics, individuals are able to distinguish and isolate themselves from others. Vice versa, they are able to identify themselves by being aware of what they are not. Thus, the concept of the other has been used in social science to examine groups’ and societies’ dealings with ‘others’, particular in terms of exclusions, such as defining who does not fit into their society. Furthermore, the other is integral to comprehending and constructing roles of individuals in relation to other people. Besides, othering² helps to distinguish between the self and the other, between home and away, the certain and the uncertain, the familiar and the foreign.

As philologist Rolf-Peter Janz pointed out, many theorists agree upon the notion that the other does not involve particular characteristics; something other always stands

² The philosophical term for Otherness is ‘alterity’, meaning the contrast between the entity and the Other to which an identity is constructed. It also suggests the ability to distinguish between the Self and the not-Self, the Other. The concept of alterity was established by philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (cf. Lévinas 3ff.).