



BLOOD BROTHERS

Brogen Hayes considers the lack of black vampires in film history.

Vampires are everywhere these days. They seem to be going through something of a rebirth (please, pardon the pun).

Turn on your TV and there are umpteen shows about the undead living among us – *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *Moonlight* to name but a few. There are also re-runs of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* to contend with. This is not even to mention the vampire films that are filling our cinemas. Stephanie Meyer and her *Twilight* Saga have a lot to answer for.

But then vampires go in and out of style every few years. Remember the hype that surrounded Neil Jordan's excellent adaptation of Anne Rice's vampire novel *Interview with the Vampire*? Not only did every girl who saw that film fall in love with either Brad Pitt or Tom Cruise, but the film led to a spate of vampire films coming out in the nineties. Then there was *From Dusk Til Dawn*, *Blade* and the terrible follow up to *Interview*, *Queen of the Damned*. Well this new resurgence is no different. Vampires faded away for a while but now they are back. And audiences are

thirsty for more.

But consider this: How many African-American vampires have you seen in recent Hollywood films? Precious few. In a time when American popular culture is changing rapidly due to the amount of foreign nationals that are bringing their culture and traditions with them when they move, it is interesting that vampire films are focussing more and more on the white male as their central characters.

Let's just think about things for a moment. There have been numerous vampire big screen outings in the

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last number of years – *Let The Right One In*, *30 Days of Night* and *I Am Legend* for example, yet how many of the vampires in these films have been African-American?

There have been African-American vampires as central characters in the past, but most of these vampires were within the exploitation style of film in the early and mid-1970s. Of these, the only one whose name is still heard is Prince Mamuwalde (better known as *Blacula*).

Blacula is the name given to Prince Mamuwalde, the ruler of an African nation by *Dracula*. The film revolves around the title character and his search for the reincarnation of his dead wife in 1972 LA. The film fits in with the Blaxploitation style of film making that was popular in the US during the 70s. The films targeted the urban African-American audience and often contained racist slurs against white Americans. Another black vampire film is *Ganja & Hess*. The film was released in the wake of *Blacula*, but was suppressed in the US as it did not turn out to be the Blaxploitation film that the studio wanted. Instead *Ganja & Hess* combines the Blaxploitation genre with the art film and becomes something else

entirely. What links the rare appearance of a black vampire in these films is the joke tended to be that the vampires were indeed black, therefore rebelling against their traditional image. This cultural breed of vampire was more the exception that proved the rule.

There have been two massive on-screen vampire successes of late, Charlaine Harris’ *True Blood* and Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight*, yet neither of these have had African American vampires in a central role.

First of all *True Blood*. Critically lauded as the best fantasy TV show to be produced in years. There are plenty of vampire characters but how many are not white? Bill Compton and Eric Northman, the two central vampire characters in the show are white. Bill is a Southern American Caucasian man turned vamp and Eric’s origins are clearly Scandanavian. Many vampires come and go throughout the show and most of them are white males, the notable exception being Diane, an African-American female vampire that appears occasionally.

Now, that is not to say that there are not a lot of black characters in *True Blood*. There are. There is Tara, her boyfriend

Eggs, her mother Lettie-Mae and the wonderfully flamboyant Lafayette. But none of these people are vampires. The closest any of them come to immortality is when Lafayette is taken hostage by Eric Northman and begs to be made a vampire. Eric refuses him.

It can be argued that there are several reasons why Eric refuses to make Lafayette a vampire. Maybe Eric is growing tired of immortality and does not wish to inflict eternal life on anyone else? Perhaps, but this is a pretty thin reason for denying someone what they want. Maybe he sees Lafayette as too frivolous? This could certainly be true. Although Lafayette does know when to keep his mouth shut. Maybe it is because Lafayette is gay. Although that’s not it either, there is a gay vampire in season 1 of *True Blood* – Eddie. But there again lies the contradiction. Although Eddie is gay, he is Caucasian and therefore tolerated by the vampire community in the show. Lafayette on the other hand, is not Caucasian, he is African-American.

So far in the series, other than Lafayette, there are no other African American candidates for vampirism. Diane is the only African American vampire to actually turn up in the show,

but her part is small and ultimately inconsequential. It appears that Diane was cast as African-American rather than written that way.

Twilight, like *True Blood*, is set in a world in which the characters occupy is very close to our own. Bella Swan is a typical teenage girl, living in Washington State before moving to the small town of Forks to be with her father, Charlie. Once there, Bella meets and falls in love with Edward Cullen, a vampire

Edward lives with a group of other vampires. They pretend to be a family in order to fit in with the communities they inhabit. All of the Cullen “family” are white Americans, and the central vampires of the film. There is however one African-American vampire, Laurent.

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pale, white picture of innocence the other peaceful vampire are. Instead, he is a blood-thirsty figure of evil, his skin colour perhaps used to differentiate him from the others?

So why are vampires in postmodern media are almost always Caucasian? Let’s look at the history of vampire folklore first. Most people will agree that the legend of the vampire comes from Eastern Europe. This is because of Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*. In this book, it appears that Stoker has created the legend of the vampire from the historical character Vlad III, Prince of Wallachia also known as Vlad the Impaler. Vlad was given the name Dracul, which is a Romanian surname meaning Son of the Devil or Son of the Dragon. Vlad III is characterised as a man who took pleasure in the torture,

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impaling and killing of his enemies. Stoker's use of an Eastern European figure may also have stemmed from the large amount of vampire folklore that comes from the region, particularly Hungary. Hungary was also the home of Elizabeth Bathory, a 16th century Countess who allegedly murdered hundreds of her servants to bathe in their blood and remain youthful.

So the legend of vampirism stems from European folklore. There are creatures with vampiric tendencies within African folklore, specifically the ramanga of Madagascar and the asanbosam of Ashanti folklore. These creatures are less human than the European vampire, however, and are often iron toothed beings that live in trees and feed on the nail clippings and spilled blood of nobles.



These African vampires do not harvest blood from their victims themselves, with the exception of the Ghanan adze – a creature that takes the form of firefly and hunts children. Even the adze is different from the European vampires though, as it does not always appear in human form, which most European vampires do.

There is also the notion of vampires as serial killers. Serial killing has been referred to as the “crime of our age” by film theorist Richard Dyer. Serial killers are facilitated by our alienated mass societies and rapid transportation and respond to the mass media objectification of women. It stands to reason then, that the vampire is the serial killer du jour. Dyer goes on to explain that serial killers are not only men, but they prey specifically on women or socially inferior men (young, black, gay). The serial killer's maleness is misogyny and male supremacism writ large. Vampires, in Hollywood films, are allowed to function in our society by the same things that allow serial killers to function – alienation and the objectification of women.

How many African-American serial killers are there in recent Hollywood films? *Se7en*, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* and *Monster* are all recent films about serial killers, and all of the killers are white Americans. Even influential black filmmaker Spike Lee's film *Summer of Sam* does not depict an African American serial killer.

Perhaps the idea of killing, fuelled either by psychosis or vampirism, is the domain of the white American in Hollywood films. This could be due to the fact that there are very few actual recorded cases of serial killers being of African-American descent, or once again point to the cultural differences between African and white Americans.

This could explain the lack of African-American vampires in *True Blood* and the *Twilight Saga*. The folklore of the vampire and the history of the serial killer simply do not fit in with the indigenous folklore of those of African descent. Once the Blaxploitation style of film making died out, it took the African-American vampire with it to the grave.

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