VAMPIRES “ON A SPECIAL DIET”: IDENTITY AND THE BODY IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA TEXTS

LEA GERHARDS

Looking at recent popular cultural productions in cinema and television, it is striking that contemporary vampire narratives seem to foreground their vampire protagonists’ natural thirst for blood and, concurrently, their epic struggle to suppress it. Bloodthirst is primarily presented as a nutritional need and as a biological impulse which vampires learn to question and constrain by constantly working on their self-control. Instead of giving in to their basic physical need to hunt and kill humans, these vampires seek alternative ways of feeding: the Cullen family in Twilight and Stefan Salvatore in The Vampire Diaries fall back on a “vegetarian” diet consisting mainly of mountain lions and other animals and True Blood’s vampires have a newly developed synthetic blood at their disposal. As will be argued in this article, the recent trend of vampires refusing to subsist on human blood and struggling for self-restraint can be placed within a more general evolution. The shift in vampire genre conventions that began in the twentieth century can be described as a process of domestication in which the vampires’ civilized nature and benevolence become manifest in their modified eating behaviour. By framing vampiric bloodthirst as a conflict between mind and body and by portraying the disciplining of the body as a marker of character strength and strong morals, recent vampire narratives it can be argued represent the postmodern notion that the body expresses identity and the self.

Bella: “I know what you are.”
Edward: “Say it. Out loud. Say it!”
Bella: “Vampire.”
Edward: “Are you afraid?”
Bella: “No.”
Edward: “Then ask me the most basic question: What do we eat?”

This dialogue is part of a central scene in Twilight, the 2008 film adaptation of Stephenie Meyer’s popular supernatural romance novel

of the same name. *Twilight* tells the story of seventeen-year-old Bella Swan, who falls head over heels in love with her mysterious classmate Edward Cullen. Having become suspicious after a number of strange events, Bella discovers Edward’s secret: he is a vampire. To be precise, he is a creature that, within the supernatural *Twilight* universe, threatens Bella’s health and safety. This is because Edward, as a vampire, occupies a position at the top of the supernatural food chain. Much to Bella’s advantage though, her lover is a vampire “on a special diet”, who abstains from human blood for ethical reasons and therefore refers to himself as “vegetarian”. The films of the *Twilight* saga, as well as other popular cultural productions incorporating the vampire motif, feature quite a number of references to the realm of human as well as vampiric food and feeding. In this respect, it is striking that recent vampire narratives seem to foreground their vampire protagonists’ natural thirst for blood and, at the same time, their epic struggle to suppress it.

Already in 2003, Sally Miller pointed out that “One of the most striking features of contemporary vampire fiction is the vampire’s reluctance to feed”. In her essay about “Vampires, the Body and Eating Disorders”, Sally Miller looks at Anne Rice’s novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), and the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). More recent but equally popular examples of the trend are the four films of the *Twilight* Saga (2008-), *Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse* und *Breaking Dawn (Part I)*, as well as the television

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2 *Twilight*, film, directed by Catherine Hardwicke, 2008 (Universal City, CA: Summit Entertainment, 2009, DVD). In vampire narratives, the word “vegetarian” is used as an analogy for someone abstaining from their primary food source, and instead consuming something that can sustain them but is less nourishing. It is worth noting that the analogy is often presented with a wink in the texts, so it is perfectly clear there is an awareness that the comparison is inherently flawed. Throughout the *Twilight* Saga, the term “vegetarian” is explicitly (and famously) used to describe the Cullen family’s diet; Edward Cullen refers to himself as “vegetarian”: “… I’d compare it to living on tofu and soy milk; we call ourselves vegetarians, our little inside joke. It doesn’t completely satiate the hunger – or rather thirst. But it keeps us strong enough to resist. Most of the time.” (*Twilight* 164).