Journal of Dracula Studies

Volume 24 | Number 1 Article 4

2022

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Cover Page Footnote

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> The vampire embodied the contradictions of blood: it obscured distinctions between the living and the dead, the human and the non-human, even psychological stability and physical metamorphoses. The vampire was also the quintessence of bad blood: of blood corrupt and virulent.
>
> —Nick Groom, *The Vampire: A New History*

In 1994, AIDS—a disease transmitted by the exchange of "bad blood" and other virulent bodily fluids—became the leading cause of death for Americans aged 25-44 (Altman C7). 1994 also saw the release of *Interview with the Vampire*, a horror film which, like HIV/AIDS in popular discourse, is

linked inherently with queer male sexuality and the exchange of transformational blood (Fan et al. 3). The film begins with a near parody of queer seduction (Haggerty 5) in the alleyway behind a San Francisco nightclub. Here, two attractive young men wordlessly lock eyes and follow one another to a private apartment (00:01:37-00:02:30). Already sexually suggestive in tone, the scene's subsequent dialogue further implies the men's homoeroticism:

> LOUIS. You followed me here, didn't you?
> MALLOY. Yes. You seemed… interesting.
> LOUIS. I was waiting for you in that alleyway. Watching you, watching me. (00:03:02-00:03:44)

Rather than culminate this innuendo in a sexual encounter, the scene subverts the audience's expectation of explicit queerness with Louis instead "coming out" to Malloy as a vampire. Here, the film establishes its metaphorical entwinement of queerness with lethal infection and archetypal deviancy. Indeed, *Interview with the Vampire* (hereafter, *Interview*) constructs its vampires as distinctly queer "Others" who embody AIDS-era stereotypes of queer men and their exchange of blood "corrupt and virulent." Like the AIDS-era queer male, these vampires are characterized as abject creatures whose unnatural desires are satiated through the consumption, corruption, and destruction of healthy bodies and heteronormative social boundaries. The vampires' subversive threat is neutralized only with extensive emotional and physical trauma, symbolically cleansing their "Otherness" and eliminating their potential to infect

or destroy. Thus, the vampire body becomes the site of voyeuristic thrill for heteronormative audiences fascinated and terrified by queer males and the lethal disease they are presumed to carry. Through analysis of *Interview*'s queer vampires, this essay demonstrates the ability of a socially dominant community to weaponize metaphoric bodies for the purposes of emotional catharsis and the reinstitution of heteronormative social order—a troublingly relevant consideration for vulnerable communities in the era of pandemic.

With the recent news of *Interview* author and screenwriter Anne Rice's unexpected death in 2021—and the announcement of a new television series set to air in late 2022 (Ramachandran)—the original *Interview* adaptation is ripe for reconsideration.[13] Contemporary film critics were quick to ignore the film's queerness[14] or downplay

[13] *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) is adapted from Anne Rice's 1976 novel of the same name. The film was written, produced, and released during the AIDS crisis, while the novel was published before the disease was known in America. While their plots are largely the same, analysis of the differences between the book and film deserves its own essay. As such, I discuss only the film adaptation.

[14] "Queer" is a contested and multivalent term; thus, I turn to Harry Benshoff's apt definition as supplement to my usage: "By *queer*, I mean to use the word both in its everyday connotations ("questionable . . . suspicious . . . strange") and also as how it has been theorized in recent years within academia and social politics. This latter "queer" is not only what differs "in some odd way from what is usual or normal" but ultimately is what opposes the binary definitions and proscriptions of a patriarchal heterosexism" (226). See

it as unintentional comedy: *The Washington Post* critic Rita Kempley wrote that the film "played for laughs," and its "second act might as well be 'Two Men and an Undead Baby'" (D1).[15] Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* was more willing to engage with the film's innate homoeroticism, astutely writing that "[p]arallels between vampirism and sex, both gay and straight, are always there in all of Rice's novels" (129). *TIME*'s Richard Corliss was one of few to connect *Interview*'s homoerotic vampirism with the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis: "The nightly rampages of these putty-faced predators suggest an aids [sic] metaphor: voluptuous sexuality with fatal consequences" (112). Conversely, scholars like Harry Benshoff embraced *Interview*'s homoeroticism by arguing that its vampires belong to a cinematic lineage of queer monsters whose coded Otherness titillates audiences, whilst paradoxically making the vampires pitiful and sympathetic (*Monsters in the Closet* 272). In the seminal *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Nina Auerbach briefly posits that *Interview* fetishizes eternally young, beautiful, self-healing vampire bodies as a filmic response to AIDS' degenerative effects (175), while George E. Haggerty contends that Rice's characters are symptomatic of the victimizing nineties, a culture feverishly concerned

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Benshoff's chapter, "The Monster and the Homosexual," in *The Monster Theory Reader.*

[15] Desson Howe, also of *The Washington Post,* remarked that *Interview* could be reconceived as a sitcom entitled "Pardon Me but Your Teeth Are in My Neck" (G48).

that accepting openly queer men would erode America's prized "family values" (10).

In addition to these compelling analyses, I argue that the film's critical discourse is incomplete without reading *Interview* as reworking the vampire-as-disease narrative trope, construing vampirism as a metaphor for HIV transmission and the vampiric body as a queer source of contagion. Without analyzing *Interview*'s vampires from combined queer, bio-medical, and generic perspectives, the cultural impact of the film's metaphoric "bad blood" is lessened, its homophobia made inert. Though the film is nearly thirty years old, its potent themes and conflation of queer bodies with contagious illness remain apposite, and therefore deserve study. [16]

As Paula Treichler, Susan Sontag, and others have previously explored, HIV and AIDS are linked to a variety of metaphors that shape the illnesses' cultural understanding through the potential encouragement of social stigmatization (Fink 416). In her influential 1987 essay, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," Treichler outlines thirty-eight distinct ways that AIDS was culturally rationalized or explained during the crisis's peak in America, including a gay plague (that probably emanated from San Francisco), gay cancer, nature's way of

[16] Due to the complexity and scope of HIV/AIDS discourse, this essay refers to its specific application on queer cisgender men. Furthermore, the term 'queer' means to include all non-heteronormative sexual identities and practices.

"cleaning house," and divine punishment for queer men's moral "weaknesses" (33). Treichler proposes that such conceptions should not be dismissed for their irrationality or homophobic fantasy; instead, these metaphors "are part of the necessary work people do in attempting to understand – however imperfectly – the complex, puzzling and quite terrifying phenomenon of AIDS" (34). "Gay cancer" and "gay plague" may be accessible shorthand to explain a frighteningly mysterious phenomenon, but these metaphors engender violently homophobic scapegoating of the disease at the expense of marginalized queer communities. In *Illness as Metaphor,* Sontag emphasizes the potential danger in understanding illness through metaphor. She suggests that "disease that is treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally, contagious" (6). Highly contagious and still little-understood at the time of Treichler's essay, the AIDS' metaphoric categorization as a "gay plague" that is "nature's way of cleaning house" indeed exemplifies Sontag's argument that ascribing metaphor to a mysterious disease could beget stigma towards those experiencing the disease. In *AIDS and Its Metaphors,* Sontag specifically applies her discussion of metaphor's dangerous potential to HIV-positive queer men, writing:

> The metaphor implements the way particularly dreaded diseases are envisaged as an alien 'other,' as enemies are in modern war; and the move from the demonization of the illness to the attribution of fault to the

> patient is an inevitable one, no matter if patients are thought of as victims. Victims suggest innocence. And innocence, by the inexorable logic that governs all relational terms, suggests guilt. (99)

Through metaphoric language like “gay cancer” and “gay plague,” HIV and AIDS cease to be only medical diagnoses; instead, their associated metaphors connote that being HIV-positive is to be also queer, contagious, deviant, threatening, guilty, “Other.”

A considerable amount of AIDS-era medical discourse implicitly, if not explicitly, attributes HIV’s transmission to queer male bodies (Treichler 37). In the infamous 1985 *Discover* cover story “AIDS: The Latest Scientific Facts,” senior editor and medical journalist John Langone interviews dozens of leading medical experts, concluding that HIV only enters the bloodstream via the "vulnerable anus" and the "fragile urethra" (40). As HIV is somehow unable to bypass the “rugged vagina” (41), it “isn’t a threat to the vast majority of heterosexuals… It is now—and is likely to remain—largely the fatal price one can pay for anal intercourse” (52). This quotation, and further use of harmful metaphor, includes some severe misconceptions of viral transmission; importantly, it also attributes HIV’s spread to queer sexuality, particularly cisgender males. By characterizing the virus as the “price one can pay” for non-heteronormative intercourse, Langone utilizes metaphor to suggest that lethal illness is the moral comeuppance for queer sexuality. He champions

heterosexuality as biologically and morally superior to queerness, which is itself characterized as potentially dangerous, though supposedly contained. Here, the threat of contagion specifically lies with queer men and their "vulnerable" anuses and "fragile" urethras; thus, for the illness to breach queer communities, it would require sexually experimental heterosexual men—or, as *Interview* suggests with its vampire subjects, *a predatory queer*.

While "gay cancer" and "gay plague" are cultural products of the late twentieth century, their lineage is traceable to the nineteenth century, when homosexuality, morality, and viral transmission converged in vampire fiction. This is perhaps most famously evident with Jonathan Harker and Count Dracula (of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*), in which the young English solicitor nearly falls victim to the Transylvanian Count's queer predation. According to Victorian sexology, Jonathan is sexually at risk while he remains in Dracula's castle, as the secluded space allows him to explore private, transgressive sexual desires (Spencer 215). It is here that Jonathan, unmarried and thus presumably a virgin, experiences Dracula's phallic bite—a sexually coded act conveniently obfuscated in Jonathan's diary entries (Stoker 71).

In the novel, vampirism functions as a way of naming the homosexual as "monstrous, dirty, threatening" (Schaffer 399), demonstrating the metaphoric value of vampirism to capture social anxieties of unspeakable illnesses. As queer theorist Marty Fink writes:

> [Since] their popularization in the nineteenth century, vampires have evolved as literary signifiers of racial and sexual deviance, embodying illnesses as wide-ranging as syphilis and tuberculosis. Rather than representing a single fear or concern, the vampire serves as what Miriam Jones [17] terms 'a floating category' that encompasses a broad spectrum of all things that defy normative constructions of nation and health. (417)

Evoking Langone's justification that HIV is the "price" queer men "pay" for deviant sexuality, *Dracula*'s fallen woman, Lucy Westenra, pays for her sexual deviancy with her health, exemplifying the vampire's deployment as a "floating category." Lucy is a literary representation of Victorian-era misogynistic medicine, a woman whose sexual appetite is equated to nymphomania and polyandry (Groom 186). In archetypal punishment, her overt sexuality exposes her to male predation (Showalter 180). Lucy physically deteriorates with each visit from Dracula, her body exhibiting the evidence of his implicitly sexual penetration. Mina Harker—Lucy's friend and moral counterpart—notes Lucy's symptoms in her diary, symptoms which recall Fink's discussion of vampire literature's metaphoric depictions of communicable diseases: "I do not

[17] See: Jones, Miriam. "The Gilda Stories: Revealing the Monsters at the Margins." *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture*. Ed. Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger. U of Pennsylvania P, 1997. 151-67.

understand Lucy's fading away as she is doing. She eats well and sleeps well, and enjoys the fresh air; but all the time the roses in her cheeks are fading, and she gets weaker and more languid day by day; at night I hear her gasping as if for air" (Stoker 128). Here, Lucy's overt sexuality is punished through the metaphor of vampiric illness. Moreover, her symptoms expose her as a deviant, similar to queer men's later experience with presumptions of sexual deviancy following an AIDS diagnosis (Sontag 114). Auerbach writes that *Dracula* is a literary culmination of *fin-de-siècle* phobias (7), as Lucy's downfall encompasses late Victorian anxieties of gender, sexuality, and disease. I argue that *Interview* is the culmination of similar late-twentieth-century phobias, substituting tuberculosis and syphilis for HIV and AIDS. The film is a contemporary example of mixing disease with metaphor and vampirism with deviant sexuality.

As politicians and scientists failed to contain HIV through the 1980s and early 1990s, transformational blood's association with deviant behaviour proliferated through a wave of vampire cinema. Films like *The Hunger* (1983), *Fright Night* (1985), and *The Lost Boys* (1987) found fey vampires preying upon, and infecting, virile young Americans (Auerbach 159). Though *Interview* debuted near the end of AIDS-era vampire cinema, the film is notable for its unique protagonist, Louis (Brad Pitt), a vampire who abhors his vampiric identity for the resulting loss of his humanity. Whereas Louis is self-loathing, his creator, Lestat (Tom Cruise), gleefully embraces his vampirism.

Louis and Lestat's mutual obsession evokes the literary vampire's origins in the homoerotic bond between Byron and Polidori, the pioneers of vampire literature (Auerbach 154). Though just as tempestuous as Byron and Polidori, Louis and Lestat's homoeroticism is modernized by rooting their queerness in bodily and moral contagion. The film does this in part by characterizing its vampires as monstrous "Others" that, like the homosexual, are willing participants in aberrant behaviour (Fink 423).

By characterizing Louis as the masculine, heteronormative ideal corrupted by the distinctly queer Lestat, the film becomes a contemporary parable of the predatory gay man's potential to pervade heteronormative communities, infect healthy bodies, and corrode heterosexuality itself. In the titular interview, Louis tells Malloy that he was once a prosperous husband and father:

> 1791 was the year it happened. I was 24, younger than you are now. But times were different then; I was a man at that age. The master of a large plantation, just south of New Orleans. I had lost my wife in childbirth. She and the infant had been buried less than half a year … I couldn't bear the pain of their loss. I longed to be released from it. I wanted to lose it all. My wealth, my estate. My sanity. (00:06:55-00:07:01)

Wealth, property, and a fruitful marriage may have been signifiers of conventional masculinity in 1791, but they also reflect institutionalized conservative

values that were widespread during the film's production and debut. In 1994—the year of *Interview*'s release—Republicans formed a majority in the House of Representatives for the first time in half a century and won a majority of the Senate on a political platform largely influenced by Christian evangelical groups (Farney 64). These groups, like Moral Majority and Focus on Family, aggressively pushed homophobic rhetoric about "traditional values," which emphasized the necessity of heteronormative nuclear families while condemning queer "lifestyles" (Farney 52). Echoing these "traditional values," *Interview* positions the nuclear family as not only an ideal but an essential stabilizing element in heteronormative masculinity. Without a family, Louis' masculine signifiers (wealth and property) are meaningless; he feels he must "lose it all" (00:06:55-00:06:57). Like a Louisianan Lucy Westenra, Louis becomes vulnerable to predation by rejecting the social role prescribed by his class and gender. He engages in gambling, excessive drinking, ideations of suicide, and worst of all, vampirism: "I longed for death. I know that now. I invited it … my invitation was open to anyone … but it was a vampire that accepted" (00:07:50-00:07:58). Louis' narration underlines his extreme alienation from his previous place in culture and directly connects this dissociation with vampirism's devious opportunism. Certainly, Lestat ensures Louis' permanent alienation from heteronormative society by infecting him with the queering, transformational vampiric bite.

Lestat is indeed the embodiment of culturally constructed queer deviancy. Haggerty describes Lestat's feminine appearance and lascivious enjoyment of Louis' body as "the mark of our culture's prototypical gay predator, roving in the darkness with an insatiable appetite that is usually only satisfied by the blood of a troubled but beautiful male. [Lestat is] the super-human blond who moves with the grace of a dancer and takes his prey with a lusty abandon that fulfills—I mean violates—every cultural taboo" (5). His delighted cultural taboo-breaking is sometimes explicit (murder, drinking blood) and other times metaphorically coded through vampirism, for example, his queerness. The first instance of this queer coding is Louis and Lestat's introduction on New Orleans' docks. Here, Louis drunkenly fumbles with an unnamed female sex worker until Lestat unceremoniously kills her and her procurer (00:07:55-00:08:30). Instead of easily killing Louis, Lestat carries him into the air and bites him, their intermingling moans indistinguishable as pleasure or pain. The scene is filmed in a tight closeup with soft lighting and stringed music, creating a cinematic tone distinctly more akin to a love scene than a frightening attack. Rather, the scene's horror comes from Lestat removing Louis from the context of a heteronormative male/female sexual pairing to force himself upon Louis instead. Under the pretense of vampiric attack, Lestat violates the social taboos of same-gender coupling and sexual assault. Thus, *Interview*'s first onscreen depiction of

vampirism, in practice, characterizes the vampire as a queer, exploitative, murderous sexual assaulter.

Lestat is a predatory taboo-breaker, but his potential to infect socially vulnerable males in body *and* mind is what makes him truly deviant. Rather than kill Louis, Lestat drains him of blood and exploits his debilitated state with an offer of the Dark Gift: "If I leave you here, you will die. And now I give you the choice I never had… Do you wish to be young and beautiful, as we are now, forever?" (00:11:51-00:11-55). Dying, Louis replies: "Yes… Yes" (00:12:02-00:12:04). Lestat offers his vampirism knowing it will physically change Louis and force him to exist outside the normative sphere of the living, partaking in taboos like murder and cannibalism to survive. Indeed, Lestat's admission that vampirism sustains itself through predacious and coercive tactics ("I give you the choice I never had") further establishes manipulation as essential to the film's homoerotic vampirism. Having successfully entrapped his prey, Lestat cuts his own wrist so Louis can feed on his blood (00:13:20-00:13:31). Initially hesitant, the more Louis drinks the more insatiable he becomes, symbolically submitting his heterosexuality through homoerotic penetration and the exchange of virulent, transformational blood. As Benshoff notes, the exchange of bodily fluids is "one of the most sustained metaphoric reworkings of the predatory homosexual/vampire myth" (270). In the scene's homoerotic context, vampirism's resulting deviancies and social isolation reflect "the price one can pay for anal intercourse" that Langone earlier

suggests (52). *Interview*'s vampires are thus toxic threats to idealized masculinity and heterosexual bodies, opportunistically exploiting and "turning" vulnerable heterosexual men. They are a metaphoric reminder for audiences of the danger in stepping outside the boundaries of normative behaviour.

As *Interview* metaphorically conflates queerness with disease and moral deviancy, it further uses vampirism to code queerness as inhibitive to functional romantic and filial relationships. Louis and Lestat's courtship begins with sexually charged coercion, entrenching it in a violent power struggle; their relationship is resultantly combative and unsatisfying, as they cannot channel their attraction around this power imbalance. To counteract this dysfunction, Louis and Lestat "create" a vampire child, Claudia, on whom they redirect their stymied desires. Claudia is the feminine conduit for these queer men's sexual, romantic, and emotional frustrations. Their relationship is an example of René Girard's homoerotic triangle, with Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick's further lens of power imbalance (26), in which sexual attraction between men is sublimated into a more appropriately masculine rivalry for a woman's romantic attention. By constructing Claudia's character as both a lover and a daughter, the film implies the necessity of a wife and child in functional relationships, thereby negating the possibility of a successful male/male coupling. Moreover, their love triangle—composed of two men and a child—contributes to ongoing homophobic associations of queerness with

pedophilia and indoctrinating children into queerness.[18]

Louis and Lestat's stunted relationship reiterates the emotional necessity that Louis placed on fatherhood and marriage in his human life. Ultimately, the vampire who longs for his former humanity cannot be happy without satisfying the heteronormative expectation of having a wife and child. However, the practice of "having" a child is more complicated for queer couples. Speaking on the queer Gothic, Paulina Palmer writes that "homosexuality tends to be linked in the mind of the general public with barrenness and sterility" (102), a notion that places queer couples in biological opposition to idealized nuclear families and the broader social imperative to procreate. Unable to reproduce "naturally," cisgender queer couples exist outside of the heteronormative reproduction cycle, a social queering that parallels vampires' existence outside of the typical cycle of living and dying. Louis is in a fit of deep self-

[18] In his book, *Marriage Under Fire*, James Dobson, the founder of Focus on Family and its leader until 2003, wrote that the "homosexual activist movement [is] working to implement a master plan that has as its centerpiece the utter destruction of the family" (19), a plan that includes "universal acceptance of the gay lifestyle, the discrediting of Scriptures that condemn homosexuality, muzzling of the clergy and Christian media, granting special privileges and rights in the law, overturning laws prohibiting pedophilia, indoctrination of children and future generations through public education, and securing all the legal benefits of marriage for any two or more people who claim to have homosexual tendencies" (19).

loathing and loneliness when he finds Claudia, an orphan, and drains her of blood (00:37:20-00:38:16). In killing her for a vampiric rebirth, Louis' inverts the typical procreation process, queering the "natural" biological act of having a child. Louis quickly realizes that killing a child is immoral and so aborts any transmission of his blood, sparing Claudia from vampirism. However, Lestat demonstrates his dominance and deviousness by finishing the ritual with his own corrupting blood (00:38:43-00:38:50). Together, Louis and Lestat commit the taboo of killing a child in their pursuit to satisfy the emotional deficiencies that result from their queer pairing. Moreover, in the film's context of vampirism as metaphor for toxic queerness, they have now infected a child and indoctrinated her into their queer "lifestyle." Here, queer coupling and procreation results in a monstrous product: an undead child who kills.

In the early 1990s, openly queer parents were a new and little-understood phenomena that generated considerable anxiety among the heteronormative masses (Patterson 1027-28). Opponents to same-gendered parents argued that queer parenting may be harmful to children's social and emotional development (Wald 381), and some family courts went so far as to suggest that gay men and lesbians are mentally ill and hence not fit to be parents, and that lesbians' and gay men's relationships with copious sexual partners left little time for ongoing parent-child interaction (Patterson 1028). These homophobic beliefs are palpable in *Interview*, as the idea of a male couple (and a male

couple raising a child) is firmly represented as unnatural and steeped in violence (*Monsters in the Closet* 272). Claudia is an example of this violence, particularly the trauma she experiences as her mind matures into an adult while her body remains a child. Anne Rice explains that Claudia is "the person robbed of power" (qtd. in King 78), her life literally ended and reshaped by two men. Her lack of power is demonstrated when she sees a woman's nude body, so different from her own. Viewing the woman's body, Claudia asks her father/lover, "I want to be her. Can I, Louis? Be like her one day?" (00:50:57-00:51:02). The answer is, of course, no; the woman embodies a physical maturity, sexuality, and bodily autonomy that Claudia can never experience as a child-vampire. Realizing this truth, Claudia kills the woman she envies and buries her under a collection of porcelain dolls that Lestat gives her annually on the anniversary of her vampiric rebirth (00:52:34-00:52:43). The woman's body decays, reaching another state of physical development that Claudia is robbed of. The body and dolls are not subtle symbols, but they articulate the scene's perverse horror as Claudia realizes that her development from a child to a woman was irreparably stunted by her fathers. As a permanent girl in a nocturnal world, Claudia can never enter the saloons, clubs, or other nighttime spaces available to vampires. She is utterly dependent on the men in her life for access and companionship. She can never experience adult relationships of her choosing, sexuality, or even daylight. With Claudia, the film explores the nineties discourse around

queer parenting by representing how vampirism's corruptive and alienating potential robs a child—perhaps society's most vulnerable member—of an emotionally healthy, normative family life.[19]

Outside of vampiric creation, Claudia can never participate in the heteronormative imperative to reproduce. Her relationship with Louis demonstrates this deviation from normative emotional and sexual development. Their relationship reiterates the thematic importance of the nuclear family: Louis can only be fulfilled with a wife and child, but the queering nature of vampirism inhibits and subverts a nuclear family to the point of producing a sterile child/wife. Their "love" is part of the film's overall critique of queerness' corrupting influence. As Reep et al. explain, "Claudia can never quite be a full companion to Louis because her body cannot match her emotions, and she needs him to take care of her in a world that sees her a child" (130). When Louis and Claudia romantically kiss (01:34:15-01:34:18), it cements the abject nature of their relationship by depicting the taboos of pedophilia and incest. Their coupling signifies how queer vampirism forces unnatural relationship dynamics and aberrant behaviour, prohibiting functional relationships and families.

Vampirism remains a popular metaphor for disease because it dexterously encompasses both the physical aspects of illness and the moral

[19] See: Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.* Duke UP Books, 2004.

connotations put upon those who are ill. On the vampire's flexible metaphorical possibilities, Ellis Hanson notes:

> [the] vampire may connote a variety of fears attached to disease, a symbol of all those perceived as exotic, alien, unnatural, oral, anal, compulsive, violent, protean, polymorphic, polyvocal, polysemous, invisible, soulless, transient . . . and a threat to wife, children, home, and phallus. (325)

While describing vampires, Hanson's quotation is applicable to the AIDS-era queer male, himself an "exotic" "alien" forced to operate on normative culture's fringes because he is an infectious threat to "wife, children, home, and phallus." After spending time in San Francisco's gay communities (where *Interview* begins), Michel Foucault said in an interview that "[what] most bothers those who are not gay about gayness is the gay lifestyle, not the sex acts themselves. It is the prospect that gays will create as yet unforeseen kinds of relationships that many people cannot tolerate" (qtd. in Dowsett 127). Foucault's quotation speaks to *Interview*'s latent homophobia: while the murders are indeed horrific, what truly terrifies and excites are Louis and Lestat's homoeroticism and Louis and Claudia's father/daughter/lover dynamic, as these relationships reify contemporary homophobic assertions that queer men are immoral, toxic, and sexually perverse. If one HIV-positive queer man terrifies, a grouping is that much worse.

In the film, vampirism is created through the exchange of transformational blood between a

vampire and a human, and vampires must feast only on the living. Like sunshine, "dead blood" harms the vampiric body. Claudia realizes that she and Louis will only find happiness if they kill Lestat and find a community of like-minded vampires. She attempts this patricide by appealing to her father's perversity, offering him "sleeping" twin boys she secretly killed (01:00:25-01:00:30). Lestat falls for her pedophilic trap: "You… let me drink… *dead* blood? You let me drink dead blood!" (01:01:53). While Lestat is weakened by the boys' blood, Claudia slits his throat in what is the film's most prominent use of its bad blood motif (01:02:15-01:02:17). Indeed, the tone shifts distinctively from terror to catharsis as Lestat writhes on the floor, his blood drowning his lungs and flooding their home. Claudia asks Louis to "lift [her] up," as Lestat's blood pools nearer to her (01:02:44-01:02:47), and their closeness in this moment highlights their romantic connection and symbolic purity compared to the bloody Lestat. The scene itself drips in subtext as the metaphorical representative for the HIV-positive queer male finally succumbs to poisonous blood. The scene revels in his downfall, in what amounts to the clearest declaration of Lestat's thematic connections with viral blood and deviant behaviour. Moreover, without Lestat, Claudia and Louis can live as husband and wife. Though she is physically a child, and his daughter, their male/female pairing is still depicted as morally superior to Louis and Lestat's queer coupling.

After Lestat's bloodletting, Claudia and Louis sail to Paris, where they find the Théâtre des

Vampires, an all-vampire acting troupe led by the mysterious Armand (Antonio Banderas). As Claudia adroitly explains, the Théâtre des Vampires are "[vampires] pretending to be humans pretending to be vampires" (01:15:05-01:15:07), an act that allows them to publicly engage in their vampirism without retribution. Instead of companionship and comradery, Claudia and Louis are repulsed by the troupe's flagrant pageantry and embrace of vampirism. Like Lestat, their proud 'Otherness' is revolting, dangerous, and fascinating, to both Louis and the audience. The Théâtre des Vampires are a public-facing extension of the monstrous, predatory queer that Lestat previously embodies. In their nightly performance, they force a young human woman on stage, strip her, and feed on her while a human audience watches, believing it to be an act in the show (01:16:47-01:19:36). The spectacle is grotesque in its sexual assault imagery, but further adding to its horror is the audience's unwitting complicity. An audience member even volunteers to be the next victim, as she is entranced and emboldened by the troupe's comforting aura of camp (01:19:10-01:19:12). Louis describes the play and its actors as "monstrous," yet he cannot look away (01:19:28-01:19:30). The moment is, perhaps, metacommentary on *Interview*, its audience, and its metaphorical queer subjects. Indeed, Benshoff argues that for "spectators of all types, the experience of watching a horror film or monster movie might be understood as similar to that of a carnival as it has been theorized by Bakhtin, wherein the conventions of normality are

ritualistically overturned within a prescribed period of time in order to celebrate the lure of the deviant" (*Monsters in the Closet* 13). In the film, the play's audience is thrilled by the troupe's 'Otherness' in the same way a predominantly heterosexual audience watches *Interview* and is thrilled by its homoerotics. To illustrate this mixture of heterosexual fear and entertainment, Benshoff further notes:

> the most terrifying moment in the film, based upon my screenings with suburban teenage audiences, occurs without fangs or bloodletting. Here, I refer to the scene between Louis and Armand, where the latter confesses his love and desire for the former . . . The unease of the audience during this scene is palpable, and identical to their bodily response to the anticipation of horror. This particular moment of terror is averted (the two withdraw without kissing), and the audience breathes a sigh of relief. (*Monsters in the Closet* 272)

I include this passage because it provides an invaluable contemporary view into an ephemeral cultural moment of the 1994 spectatorship experience. At Benshoff's theatre, heterosexual fear and amusement are voyeuristically situated in queer sexuality and queer bodies. Louis and Armand's almost-kiss is laden with meaning because it connotes the exotic potential of sex between men while stoking anxiety of the disease they carry. Homoerotic titillation is what provides *Interview*'s

horror entertainment; the fangs and bloodletting are incidental.

According to Rice, film studios were afraid to adapt *Interview* for years because they did not want to be accused of depicting homosexuality in conjunction with child molesting, referring to Louis and Claudia's relationship and Lestat and Armand's penchants for young boys (qtd. in Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet* 271). Rice's statement suggests the film does promote queer predation but contradicts another claim that, as a heterosexual cisgender woman, she is an ally to queer communities (King 79). In explaining this paradox, Haggerty suggests that "Rice's vampires express our culture's secret desire for and secret fear of the gay man; the need to fly with him beyond the confines of heterosexual convention and bourgeois family life to an exploration of unauthorized desires, and at the same time to taste his body and his blood; to see him bleed and watch him succumb to death-in-life" (6). This rationale explains the film's extensive depictions of emotional and physical trauma upon vampiric, or queer, bodies. Lestat's bloody death is a moment of catharsis, as evidenced in the scene's swelling music and lingering camera (01:08:03-01:08:40). However, the gruesomeness of this scene is not enough; in a twist, Lestat survives the attack only to be set on fire when he returns to Claudia and Louis alive (01:11:35-01:11:45). Both apparent deaths (he survives the fire, too) provide Claudia, Louis, and the audience with an emotional release through his suffering. One of the film's most startling scenes is

Louis discovering Lestat in a dilapidated shack, decades after his lacerating and burning (01:44:33-00:44:50). Lestat is paler, with thin hair, emaciated limbs, and open sores. His image strongly evokes widespread contemporary news coverage of late-stage AIDS, [20] furthering *Interview*'s metaphoric association of queerness with the illness and the punishment of queerness with disease. Even in this pitiful moment, Lestat is the villain. The film finds justice in his prolonged physical and emotional torture because his suffering is the consequence of his proud embrace of vampirism. Similarly to Langone's earlier statement that HIV is the "fatal price one can pay" for male/male sex, Lestat's bodily destruction is likewise depicted as the "price" he pays for his deviant, queer-coded vampirism. Here, audiences can be horrified by his sickness yet relieved to see him suffer; just as Louis leaves Lestat to die alone, so too can audiences let him die knowing that this is his comeuppance, or nature "cleaning house."

Louis concludes his titular interview with the message that vampirism is a corrosive, parasitic way of being that must be eliminated to protect the vulnerable living. However, this lesson is lost on Malloy, who begs, "I want what you have! Take me, I want to be like you!" (01:55:44-01:55:52). For all the film's homoerotics, it is unable to create a bond between two men that is more than the symptom of a corrupt and corrupting homosexual

[20] See Adelman and Verbrugge for depictions of late-stage AIDS patients in the media 347–367.

culture (Haggerty 14). Nearly thirty years later, the cultural homophobia that *Interview* perpetuates continues to impact queer lives. In 2022, men who have sex with men must abstain from same-gender sexual activity for a minimum of 90 days before they are eligible to donate blood in the United States (Lavietes).[21] Even with COVID-19 surges increasing the urgent need for blood, the policy remains as does the conflation of gay men with "bad blood."

Though remarkably homoerotic, *Interview with the Vampire* is not for queers; rather, it is a cinematic parable feeding contemporary homophobia and perpetuating cultural ignorance through the metaphoric conflation of queerness with disease and deviancy. It is a product of AIDS-era hysteria, entrenching harmful stereotypes in metaphor to cathartically release heteronormative anxiety at the expense of HIV-positive queer men. Unnatural and inherently lethal, these vampires mimic contemporary stereotypes of the queer male as a carrier of death and disease, incapable of recreating heteronormative ideals by nature of their predacious "Otherness." Time will tell if the forthcoming television series continues or subverts this homophobia.

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[21] As draconian as this policy is, men who have sex with men can donate only as of 2015. The previous ban was instituted in 1983, when transmitting AIDS (including between heterosexuals) was still little understood (Lavietes).

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