

Searching for the Other in HBO's Hit Series *True Blood*

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Abstract The paper analyzes the phenomenon of the Other in a highly acclaimed American television series *True Blood* and points out that popular culture, despite its obvious entertainment value, can be used to display a deep and serious context. *True Blood's* plot focuses on the civil right movement's political fight to becoming equal citizens of the United States, using the allegory of the vampire. HBO's production, being very successful around the world, has made an important contribution to raising the awareness of minorities' rights and is a perfect example of a commercially successful work of art that has the ability to change the situation of minorities worldwide. The article explains the idea of the Other and provides a general description of the phenomenon of popular culture.

Key words marginalization; popular culture; vampire; discrimination; civil rights movement

“The Other” is a philosophical and sociological term which means “different” and it quite often serves to name a person or a group of people excluded from a given social group because he or she does not succumb to the rules governing it. The Other is, on numerous occasion, rejected and stigmatized, and the rest of the society usually rejects that the person, makes him or her feel not accepted and deprives the person the sense of belonging to their group unless he or she subordinates to the majority. The Other has limited legal rights (in extreme situations may even be considered a sub-human, i.e. a person lacking civil rights), but the term itself does not have to refer only to a given human being; Otherness can be a far broader phenomenon describing the difference between home and away, the feeling of certainty and uncertainty, and it may result in the outcast of not only an individual (an outcast who finds himself in a hostile community) but the whole group or the community.

The term of the Other was first coined by Emmanuel Levinas and apart from the philosophical concept it has political, social and psychological implications. In his

book *Totality and Infinity* Levinas underscores the importance of encountering the Other in our lives and claims that “the presence of the Other, a privileged heteronomy, does not clash with freedom but invests it...” (88). He also notes that “The possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows...” (172-173). Being close to the Other enriches our own culture and teaches us what tolerance is, as long as we are open-minded to appreciate the opportunity.

According to the definition on the City University of New York’s website, the Other is “an individual who is perceived by the group as not belonging, as being different in some fundamental way.” And “Otherness takes many forms. The Other may be someone who is of...”

- a different race (White vs. non-White),
- a different nationality (Anglo Saxon vs. Italian),
- a different religion (Protestant vs. Catholic or Christian vs. Jew),
- a different social class (aristocrat vs. serf),
- a different political ideology (capitalism vs. communism),
- a different sexual orientation (heterosexual vs. homosexual),
- a different origin (native born vs. immigrant). (“The Other”)

There have been countless examples of the Other in novels or films; stories concerning sexual, religious, social or national minorities struggling to live a decent life among a non-friendly environment as well as trying to fight for their rights. In the article I would like to focus on presenting the Other as an individual (or a whole social group) being rejected as shown in one of the most popular modern TV shows, HBO’s *True Blood*.

A natural question that appears at this point is why to trace the Other in the art for the masses. Popular culture seems to be one of the most reachable forms of art due to its omnipresence in the media, and, thus, an analysis of the images of the Other in popular culture reveals social opinions of this phenomenon. As we have a basic idea of the concept of The Other, it is appropriate now to explain the notion of popular culture.

Popular culture is a term describing cultural activities or commercial products suited for the general masses. Such a definition may be, however, perceived as too general and quite imprecise, just like the popular culture itself. Popculture is rather a vague concept since it is addressed to general masses. What is more, the term “general masses” may prompt pejorative associations as it might describe a non-demanding audience, lacking the taste and blindly following other people’s expectations.

In his book *Cultural Theory & Popular Culture: an Introduction*, John Storey underscores that there is no possibility to discuss popculture without giving it a proper definition. According to him,

1. It is the culture known by the masses, not only a certain part of a society, but people around the world.
2. It does not fulfill the high culture standards, it is made to satisfy the masses and for consumer reasons.
3. It is the culture that is based on what the people, its receivers need and want.
4. It is the culture of rebellion, of breaking the rules. It is against the stiff frames that high culture ought to follow. It has no boundaries, and it has limitless capacity that allows to mix high and low culture together. (4-11)

There is no doubt that popular culture, because of its impressive reach, not only highlights specific social phenomena, but also carries a huge educational potential. *True Blood* perfectly catches people's attention on the idea of the Otherness.

Jason Stackhouse: A lot of Americans don't think you people deserve special rights.

Bill Compton: They're the same rights you have.

Jason Stackhouse: No, I'm just saying there's a reason things are the way they are.

Bill Compton: Yeah. It's called injustice. (True Blood, season 1, episode 2, "The First Taste")

Since the release of *Twilight*, an incredibly popular saga written by Stephanie Meyer, the phenomenon of vampire-mania has flourished in the popculture. There is no doubt that the bloodsucking creatures have never been so popular since *Dracula* or Anne Rice's novels. The popularity of the vampire stories is sustained by HBO's show called *True Blood*, which is based on Charlaine Harris' book *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (aka "Sookie Stackhouse Novels") and deals with vampires' right movement in the state of Louisiana.

That *True Blood* is full of plots and stories focusing on the concept of The Other making it far more serious and complicated than an average fantasy/romance vampire story. Looking closely at the characters, it is clear that most of them represent certain forms of Otherness, and they try to create a peaceful and equal society.

As Alan Ball, *True Blood*'s creator and an executive producer, noted in an interview for the *Daily Beast*, "True Blood is itself a shifting metaphor for oppressed

minorities in America, with vampires and other supernatural standing in at times for gay people, blacks, or a slew of other groups.” The opening credits already highlight the show’s agenda with members of Ku Klux Klan looking at viewers from their TV screens and a neon light displaying “God Hates Fangs” sign in front of a church (referring to an infamous “God Hates Fags” message made by Westboro Baptist Church).

The Japanese invention of a synthetic blood drink called *TruBlood*, allows the vampires living outside the human world to “come out of the coffin.” They do not need to hunt people anymore, they can live among them and drink their favorite blood type heated to the preferable 36.6 C (97.8 F); however, not everyone is thrilled with this. After all, who, when having to choose between the food they love would pick its poor supplement, deprived of taste and the pleasure of consuming? It is no wonder that most people act rather reserved when seeing vampires trying to settle down among them. Coming out of the coffin is only the beginning; it soon turns out the bloodsucking creatures own pubs, airlines, a chain of hotels, that they pay taxes, and they even start the American Vampire League that fights for treating them as equals among people. The party wants to push the VRA (Vampire Rights Amendment) which, if approved and ratified, would give vampires equal rights to humans and the occurrence that triggered the initiative was a night vampire rally in Washington D.C. which took place a couple of years prior to the show’s story. VRA faces very strong opposition, especially among conservative groups (it is an obvious metaphor for minorities’ struggle for acceptance and equality), but AVL spokeswoman skillfully rejects the critical approach. She is present in most of the news and talk-show programs, which reminds the viewers that all rights-based movement (whether gay, women, indigenous, civil or religious) require the media coverage and good representatives.

“Coming out of the coffin” is an allegory for “coming out of the closet”, a situation when a person who is bi- or homo-sexual decides to reveal his or her sexual preferences. People who are scared of vampires are called vampophobic. If we look deeper into the problem, we might ask whether the vampires can really be trusted, where the line between tolerance and the self-preservation instinct should be drawn and whether people who do not support the vampires’ equality movement are prejudiced or scared. Yet the act of raising such questions would suggest that we miss the message of the story, namely, the need for tolerance and the vampires’ struggle to have the same rights as all other citizens:

It doesn't take much imagination to perceive the parallels between this Vampirian struggle and the 1960's Black civil rights movement in America. The widespread

prejudice towards vampires seen on *True Blood* forces us to confront the cynical possibility that outgroup prejudice is part of our basic psychological make-up. History is repeating itself despite the lessons that past racial conflicts had supposedly taught our society. ("True Blood Psychology")

There are a lot of traces of intolerance towards vampires in the series, some of which can be even described as hate crimes. In season one woman who socializes with vampires is murdered by a serial killer who hates "fangbangers" (an offensive name for all people who hang out with vampires and support them). Three vampires, while staying in their home, are killed in a fire caused by vampire-haters. An unintentional victim of the embezzlement is a human who was spending time with them. The police are oddly befuddled and sluggish in their investigation and show a lot of ignorance in their work. The viewers might think the law enforcement is not truly engaged in finding the killers because the officers want to stay out of the case and feel that perhaps the vampire-supporters get what they deserve. The first season also shows people protesting against a new law in the state of Vermont allowing vampires and humans to marry.

Season two focuses on the story of a Fellowship of The Sun church, a pseudo-religious organization committing on antagonizing vampires and turning people against them in the name of God. The church holds special camps during which reverend Steven Newlin sparks vampire-hate among his listeners and teaches them how to effectively and efficiently bring the true death upon them (this is, once again, a metaphor for many religious organizations that are openly against homosexuals and condemn them). In season three the police refuse to search for a kidnapped vampire claiming that it is dubious if the vampires are alive or un-dead, which means it might be doubtful if the officer ought to engage in search for someone who is already not-alive (vampires in the series are often described as being un-dead). Season three also reveals factions within vampire environment which makes clear that not all bloodsuckers are eager to peacefully co-exist with humans. Season four shows the trend of more and more people protesting against vampires living in Bon Temps alarmed by season three revelations. The fifth installment of the show reveals religious fanatics among vampire authorities expecting uncritical obedience and blind following of their bible, imposing the death to the vampires who disagree with them, as well as factions within the organization, opposing the human-friendly attitude of the leaders. It turns out not only the vampires are the Other and that there are numerous examples of Otherness among them too.

Vampires are not the only minority displayed in *True Blood*; for instance, in a bar, the main cook, Lafayette, is homosexual. It seems that on an every-day basis, the

small community of Bon Temps town has no problem with a make-up wearing chef, who not only is gay, but also black; there are, however, a few conflict situations in the show involving him; some customers who do not want to eat a burger prepared by him, claiming it might have AIDS (a stereotype that all homosexual people are bound to be HIV positive) or a politician who sleeps with Lafayette in his private time but is opposite homosexuality when interviewed by television during a campaign. What is absorbing about Lafayette is the rather untypical way the character is portrayed; he is very flamboyant on one hand, but very masculine on the other and he is by far one of the strongest characters in the show, both physically and mentally. He is very comfortable with his sexuality, unashamed of who and what he is and has no problem with pursuing his love interests. His sexuality is not an excuse for the writers to show him as a vulnerable or conflicted character. Lafayette does not have to prove anything to anybody and lives according to his own standards and does not want to hurt anyone around him. He does, however, have his opinion about vampires' rights, stating that no law has ever been obeyed just because it was asked for, written and voted in. Very bitter words coming from a representative of not one but two minorities (race and sexual orientation-based), whose family has lived in the deep American South for generations. Throughout the series it is also revealed that there are gays among vampires who, being creatures with no sexual boundaries, have no problem with their orientation.

Apart from the idea of struggling for equality, in the vampire society itself there are marginalized (Other) individuals. Bill Compton, the series protagonist, is an over 175 years old vampire, turned against his will, who has been struggling with his blood-sucking nature since he was made, and has never fully come to terms with it. Despite being one of the youngest vampires in the Bon Temps community (and the age is a significant factor as far as vampire hierarchy is concerned) Bill is not submissive, he does not succumb to his much older superlatives, he even rebels against his own maker, finally killing her; he also stakes one of his own while protecting an attacked human; an action completely new and incomprehensible for other vampires. Torn between the two worlds, embracing memories of his former, mortal life, he wants to live among the people and tries to be a decent person but his instinct and blood-drive keep on reminding him he no longer is nor will he ever be human again. All this makes Bill Compton a diversified, conflicted character and his example shows perfectly the vampire struggle to live a normal, human-equal life. The viewers, instead of being afraid of him, may feel sorry for him, because it is difficult to imagine eternity spent without a glimpse of self-acceptance and feeling resentful towards one's nature.. Another example of such a conflicted vampire in the series is Godric. He was an over 2000-year-old vampire and he had every possible potential to

become a vampire Messiah, who would struggle for the peaceful coexistence between humans and his own kind, and spread the words of love and peace. The character dies rather quickly, but it is clear that his point of view brought him more enemies than supporters among his vampire brothers.

The Otherness in *True Blood* is represented both by vampires struggling to become equal citizens in American society, who pay taxes and thus should be allowed to vote, own properties and have crimes against them investigated by the law enforcement and homosexual individuals who need to deal with the prejudiced small-town society. What is original about the HBO series is that it stigmatizes (and condemns) the hypocrisy among people who socialize with blood-sucking creatures and use their blood as a drug and medicine (it is revealed that vampire blood heals human bodies and improves their sex lives) .but do not want to respect their civil rights. It also shows that the vampire society is not homogeneous, that among them there are those who do not want to socialize with people and spot humans only as a source of food and those who wish to mainstream and live together with them, and that not all vampires accept their dark nature. It can easily be said that *True Blood* is so unique not only because it shows the complicated side of a diversified modern society, and the problems occurring when representatives of minorities try to live peacefully among others; it also points out that Otherness can be sought within all possible social groups. *True Blood* is a show that gives a voice to all the injustice and intolerance that the marginalized groups around the world are suffering, because the vampires are only a metaphor. In fact, *True Blood* is a story of sexual, religious and racial minorities.

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