

THE FANGTASIA EXPERIENCE: *TRUE BLOOD* FANS, COMMODIFICATION AND LIFESTYLE

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This feels a bit like what a vampire bar would look like if it were a ride in Disneyworld. ('Escape from Dragon House', 1.4)

When *True Blood*'s Sookie Stackhouse first enters Fangtasia in Shreveport, she is met with the sight of its 'vampire-friendly' clientele. The women are wearing a variety of PVC, leather and lace garments, with fishnets, blood-red mini-tutus and black duct tape nipple pasties. The men wear their hair long and dye it black or blue. Their eyes drip with dark eyeliner and they wear matching black lipstick. Together, the vampires and fangbangers writhe around a bar that is awash with vintage lamps, rouge wallpaper and red and black velvet soft furnishings. A vampire pole dancer, fashioning a black PVC bikini and sprayed-on mini-shorts, gyrates with phantom speed to the beat of 'Don't Fear the Reaper'. In the corner, Sookie notices a merchandise stall where an older couple purchase Fangtasia T-shirts and other branded paraphernalia.

Whilst this sequence, quite satirically, uses these overblown Gothic aesthetics to reveal the vampires' manipulation of their own image or brand, so that vampire products appeal to and are consumed by humans, the sequence also resonates strongly with recent trends in twenty-first-century popular culture. The first decade of the twenty-first century has displayed an ever-increasing fascination with vampires, and with Goth, vampire

and steampunk¹ subcultures. The spate of recent vampire books, films and television programmes such as the *Twilight* series, *True Blood*, *Being Human* (2008–ongoing, BBC, UK)/ (2011–ongoing, SyFy, USA) and *Let the Right One In/Låt den rätte komma in* (Thomas Alfredson, 2008, Sweden), as well as vampire-like styles in catwalk fashion, suggests there is pleasure to be found in the consumption of vampire-inspired products. As Sookie's remark about Disneyland in the epigraph reveals, instead of representing purely evil beings, contemporary vampires – like the spectacle of a theme park ride – demonstrate a certain playfulness. Or as Catherine Spooner asserts in her discussion of twenty-first-century Gothic, these vampires exhibit a 'new lightness' that invites us to revel in 'sensation' and 'entertainment'; the vampire and wider Gothic culture is 'witty, sexy, cool' (Spooner 2010, xi).

Not only is contemporary Gothic about pleasure seeking, it is – like the merchandising corner in Fangtasia – also increasingly about commodification. Currently, the fashion industry exploits the saleable nature of contemporary Gothic. The catwalk has a long history of presenting emaciated, beautiful models with hollow stares who stalk the runway in seemingly undead, trancelike states. In recent years, the actual designs have become equally vampiric in style. The recent FIT *Gothic: Dark Glamour*² exhibition (2008–9) explored how the Gothic inspires high fashion. In the book that accompanied the exhibition, Valerie Steele details the work of recent influential designers such as Kei Kagami's monstrous steampunk productions and Alexander McQueen's Voss collection that conjures images of vampirism, decay and blood disease. Similarly, Giles Deacon's 'darkly fetishistic' collection for autumn/winter 2011/12 is strongly influenced by Victorian and Edwardian designs (Blanks 2011) and the recent *asos* magazine article 'The Edge of Darkness' also charts designers such as Wunderkind's strong-shouldered dresses and exaggerated silhouettes, Nina Ricci's Tuxedo jackets and the Mulleavy sisters of Rodarte's 'Frankenstein's monster-inspired take on the Gothic' as being influential contributions to the '*Twilight* Effect' (Magdalino 2009, 76).

Fashion on the high street has consequently adopted a deathly aesthetic with a Victorian edge. Recent seasons' trends have included an array of lace, leather and velvet fabrics, tailored tops, dresses and coats with sharply architected shoulders and Victorian necklines. Shoes and boots are chunky and loose around the ankle making legs look thin and fragile, even stilettos must be extreme. The cosmetics industry also demonstrates how vampire narratives and archetypes are used to market products. Popular cosmetics include deep plum and burgundy lip colour worn with pallid complexions starkly contrasted with soft damson, pinched cheeks and long, dark dramatic, spidery eyelashes. This is all framed by messy, backcombed, texturized hair, creating the overall look of a beautifully tragic porcelain doll. For instance, the Illamasqua brand – 'makeup for your alter ego' – playfully referenced a sequence from Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992, USA) for their 'Sirens' range.³ The campaign includes photographs of two attractive, scantily clad young women, wearing gold, swirling headbands; their skin has a shimmering blue cyanosis tinge. They are writhing around on a stone background, seducing a bare-chested, dark-haired man. The scene pays homage to the sequence in the film, when Jonathan Harker is seduced by the devil's concubines.

As these examples from the fashion and beauty industry demonstrate, the obsession with the Gothic and particularly the vampire is – now more than ever – a commodified experience. Vampires are not constrained to fiction, they are part of lifestyle. They can be identified in the clothes we wear, the shows we watch, the books we read and even the bars we frequent. Taking the *True Blood* franchise as a case study, this chapter will draw on research by Henry Jenkins on cult texts and the 'art of world making' (2008, 115) and will explore how fans of *True Blood* consume and participate in the text in everyday life. Fans can gain entry into the *True Blood* universe in a variety of ways. They can interact with the literary space (the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*), the televisual space (the HBO *True Blood* series), the comic book space (the IDW Publishing series), the commercial merchandising space (official HBO franchise commodities) and –

most importantly for this chapter – the lifestyle space: Fangtasia London (Bethnal Green's *True Blood* experience) and various online communities. By reviewing these fan entry points into the *True Blood* universe (focusing on lifestyle and commodity factors) and drawing on interviews with fans and participant observations at 'real life' vampire events, this chapter will explore the cult status of *True Blood* and how the *True Blood* universe has been reimaged and elaborated upon since the novel *Dead Until Dark* (Harris 2001). The discussion will address the reasons why fans engage with a *True Blood* vampire lifestyle and what this reveals about twenty-first-century culture.

The *True Blood* Universe

In his chapter 'Searching for the Origami Unicorn: *The Matrix* and Transmedia Storytelling' (2008), Henry Jenkins approaches the *Matrix* phenomenon as an example of how horizontally integrated industries can create a narrative to be shared across multiple media platforms (such as films, television programmes, graphic novels and theme park rides). For Jenkins, this type of 'synergistic storytelling' is not only built on lucrative commercial incentives, so that companies can capitalize on a diversified market area, it is also linked to a text's wider 'cult' appeal (2008, 103). Jenkins draws on Umberto Eco's research into the creation of cult artefacts as he suggests that there are various contributing factors that create cult status. Amongst the most important of these is the 'art of world making', presenting fans with an encyclopedic universe that can be mined. Cult texts contain such intricate architectures and furniture that they can be easily quoted; they also contain gaps and fissures, so that it is possible 'to break, dislocate, unhinge' them (Eco in Jenkins 2008, 100). This offers fans new insights into the universe and allows them some ownership and control of the material, as these 'breaks' allow fans to reimagine what went on in the gaps, flex their encyclopedic muscles and demonstrate that they are well versed in the universe, transforming the text from something

that they consume into something they recreate, invest in and hold dear.

True Blood, like *The Matrix* (Andy and Laurence Wachowski, 1999, USA), contains a visual, encyclopedic universe that can be mined by fans. For this reason, it is no surprise that *True Blood* has extended so easily into commodity and lifestyle spaces. For instance, both the novels and the television show place a strong emphasis on dress. Charlaine Harris's *Sookie Stackhouse Mysteries* are littered with superfluous detail about Sookie's latest outfits, hairstyles and cosmetics. *True Blood*'s costume designs also carefully construct a very specific image for Sookie, with her natural, fresh-faced make-up, long, blonde hair, floral dresses and array of tiny shorts that expose her perfect tan. Sookie's clothes and accessories throughout the series present her – in sharp contrast to the vampires – as a character who is happier outdoors; she is a distinctly Southern sun-worshipper, with an ethereal quality (which is a hint towards her fairy heritage). Similarly, as well as containing extraneous details concerning dress, the *True Blood* universe also includes easily identifiable, branded architectures such as Fangtasia, Merlotte's Bar & Grill and Lou Pines. These familiar architectures can then be mined and excavated by both HBO and fans' own creativities.

From even the most cursory of glances at HBO's *True Blood* website,⁴ it is possible to note how these stylistic features have diversified into wider media. There is a range of branded *True Blood* commodities on offer, including Merlotte's Bar & Grill waitress uniforms with matching aprons, apparel from vampire rights group the American Vampire League, Bon Temps Varsity jackets as worn by Jason Stackhouse, Herveaux Contracting baseball caps based on those of Alcide Herveaux in the third season, Fangtasia neon-signs, Type O-Negative Tru Blood drink sets and T-shirts from the Lou Pines Packmaster's Were bar. Fans can purchase products printed with quotes and references to the *True Blood* universe such as T-shirts printed with Bill's catchphrase 'Sookie is Mine', 'Team Bill' and 'Team Eric' tops and products with less overt branding such as Eric's Silver Bullet necklace.

As well as the official merchandise that is available, fans are also creating a whole host of unofficial *True Blood* commodities on sites such as Etsy⁵ and Zazzle.⁶ Products include Eric's slogan 'Is there blood in my hair?' bumper stickers, Lafayette aprons, Lorena-inspired, black resin rose rings, 'bite me' badges, 'I wanna be Sookie' pendants and handpainted, wooden 'baby vampire' dolls in the style of characters from the show. Fan art is also available to purchase online; examples include Sookie and Eric paintings that explore various romantic scenarios, portraits of Eric envisioned as a vampire Viking, Sookie/Bill poetry and Claude/Claudine fae imagery.⁷

Fans' relationship with the *True Blood* franchise is, therefore, maintained through both commodity purchases and their own creativity. Fans are not only purchasing official products from the franchise, but are also creating their own versions of the text, elaborating on their favourite characters (as demonstrated by the Eric, Lafayette and Lorena products) and using their creativity to generate income for their own small businesses. These fan-made artefacts reveal that fans are exploring 'gaps' in the televisual narrative by imagining new insights into the universe, from romantic sequences between Eric and Sookie to fully fledged explorations of Eric's past as a Viking. However, as the next section will explore in detail, the stylistic features of the show are reimagined even further in the creation of a tactile, real-world tribute to the *True Blood* universe at Fangtasia London. It will examine those aspects of the *True Blood* universe that are being privileged in this lifestyle experience and what this might reveal about wider pleasures of *True Blood*.

***True Blood* Lifestyle: Fangtasia London⁸**

Fangtasia London describes itself as 'a unique performance club experience with drinking, dancing, and death in the swamplands of Bethnal Green ... It's the place to be for vamps, tramps, shape-shifters, were-folk, fangbangers and anyone with a taste for the dark side of the South' (FangtasiaLondon.Blogspot

2010).⁹ Like the HBO series, Fangtasia London does not shy away from the edginess of vampire appeal. The venue for the event is the Resistance Gallery located in Poyser Street, a dark and dingy alleyway surrounded by abandoned warehouses and studio spaces. Unlike the neon sign outside HBO's Fangtasia, there are no external signifiers to herald one's arrival at this 'real life' event; instead, visitors must knock on the steal shutter and be 'invited in'. The awkwardness of visiting the venue immediately creates a sense of tension for newcomers as they must cross the threshold without any idea of what they might find the other side.

Upon entering the Resistance Gallery, the familiarity of the *True Blood* universe is apparent. The space contains familiar furniture from HBO's Fangtasia; the entrance is dimly lit with antique lamps and is decorated with red velvet soft furnishings. Death country, southern rock, grunge, goth and metal blare out from two large speakers. A stage contains a dancing pole, a blood-red curtain masks the entrance for the performance acts, a wooden stand displays taxidermy objects and patrons can be photographed in their finest *True Blood* regalia on a dilapidated sofa (in a style similar to Eric's throne). At various points in the evening performance acts take centre stage (in the style of the vampire pole dancers of the *True Blood* series). One such performer is Esinem, a Japanese rope suspension bondage act featuring a man dressed in an outfit inspired by *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922, Germany), with sharp-pointed vampire incisors and bat-inspired latex ears, entwining a semi-naked woman in ropes whilst she is suspended in mid-air. Others include neo-burlesque werewolf pole dancers and Amanda Mae Voodoo's Corporate Cannibal striptease (which involves Amanda Mae smothering her semi-naked body with a bloody meat carcass).

Elsewhere, the venue houses various alternative or subcultural artefacts that are in keeping with the tone of the evening; these include a steampunk robotic baby with severed legs and exposed mechanical intestines and a white stone bust of a Victorian woman with torn facial tissue and eyes gouged out.¹⁰ The bar is lined with bottles of Type O-Negative Tru Blood and upstairs

patrons have the opportunity to buy imitation vampire fangs custom-fitted to their own teeth by Blood Red FX. The event even has its very own 'Sheriff of E2', as Resistance Gallery CEO and resident DJ Gary Vanderhorne's appearance and presence is a playful homage to the *True Blood* character Eric Northman, Vampire Sheriff of Area 5.

Dressing up is also an important part of the event as patrons fashion a diverse range of ensembles. Outfits are predominantly black and inspired by Gothic and historical aesthetics. Among the apparel observed during the research were Victoriana-style corsets, gloves, 1950s swing dresses, fishnets, exaggerated stilettos, suspender belts, black translucent tights with stitched-in suspender line, pink and red dyed hair, retro fingerwave hairstyles, black top hats for men and women, Gothic-style fascinators, false eyelashes, coloured contact lenses, tattoos and piercings. Outfits also reflect the American Deep South setting of the show with women wearing their hair in ponytails and dressing in checked shirts, knotted at the midriff, with denim mini-skirts. Next to the stage, a vaulting horse is available for rodeo-inspired photographs.

Returning to Jenkins's discussion of 'the art of world-making' (2008), Fangtasia London works as an additional entry point into the *True Blood* universe and the cult appeal of the text. Like *True Blood* merchandise, the event reveals that it is not enough for fans just to watch the show or read the books; increasingly, fans desire 'to break' and 'dislocate' the text from its original media and to participate in it (2008, 100). However, whilst Fangtasia London may be a recognizable, tangible *True Blood* architecture that is furnished with *some* paraphernalia from the show, these extra-textual references are not presented in excess. For instance, posters of characters are generally avoided and the majority of outfits do not directly imitate costumes from the series. Instead, attendees fashion a variety of cult objects which far exceed those aesthetics associated with *True Blood*. This deliberate avoidance of gimmicky references to the television series authenticates the evening and emphasizes the 'real life' reimagining of the *True Blood* universe. So whilst on a very basic level the event may

provide fans with the opportunity to drink Tru Blood, to listen to the show's soundtrack and to inhabit familiar architectures from Louisiana, the Fangtasia experience offers more than just a re-enactment of *True Blood* settings and design. Fans may be mining the universe, but these extra-textual features are then transformed into a wider sense of self and incorporated into their lifestyle.

In this way, Fangtasia London provides a carnivalesque outlet (Bakhtin 1968). It allows people to escape from their usual life and participate in experiences outside the ordinary. For some attendees this is a one-off event, and therefore a chance to play and experiment in a form of 'temporary liberation' (1968, 34), but for others, Fangtasia London is visited frequently, forming part of an immersion in the wider alternative scene. Whilst not all attendees of Fangtasia London are members of alternative subcultures, there is (not surprisingly) a significant overlap with wider Goth, neo-burlesque and fetish communities. As the following response from interview respondent Tori reveals, events like Fangtasia are associated with alternative approaches to dress and identity. Attending the event is as much about community and dress as it is about celebrating fan interests in the show/novels. For Tori, Fangtasia provides opportunities to adopt vintage glamour and a more historical approach to style in place of today's comparatively casual, less glamorous fashion:

I love the show, but it's the dressing up, amazing stage performances and of course the community aspects that actually really make the night. Some people spend days making their outfit, I wear burlesque/Victoriana combinations, handmade corsets, skirts with a little bustle at the back, 1950s underwear, girdles, proper 1950s suspenders, the hosiery with seams up the back. Places like Fangtasia are a response to our time, a time that for girls there is not a lot of glamour. In the '20s, '30s, '40s and '50s no matter how much money you had, you made yourself glamorous and beautiful, even if it meant putting gravy browning on your legs. The thing is nowadays, it's

not just that there's not any glamour anymore, it's worse than that, because now when you do dress up you look strange or out of place. Events like Fangtasia offer the chance to dress up, spend hours getting ready and look perfect. (Tori Fangtasia Interview, 2011)

Tori's response reveals that the Fangtasia experience offers people a space to dress differently and socialize with other members of alternative communities. Similar pleasures – of standing out from the mainstream and socially sanctioned forms of gender and sexuality – were also more widely mentioned by fans of *True Blood* and the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*. For instance, during interviews many fans stated that they particularly enjoyed the theme of the outsider within the *True Blood* narrative. Alongside other characters such as Lafayette and Tara, Sookie was specifically noted as an outsider as she does not fit into the wider Bon Temps community. From the first episode of the television series, Sookie is described as 'dim-witted' and 'crazy as a bed bug' ('Strange Love', 1.1) and her telepathy is referred to as a 'disability' in the novels. However, as the narrative unfolds, Sookie is revealed to be a character of great emotional and physical strength and her insertion into the supernatural world allows her to fit into an alternative community of people who are different. Sookie – like the other 'supes' – is presented as unusual and unique. As the following respondent articulates, there are similar pleasures to be found in both the *True Blood* universe and belonging to alternative lifestyle subcultures:

Bella [from *Twilight*] and Sookie, both see themselves as kind of misfits, and the vampires/supernatural world offers them a place to belong. Bella turns out to be a very capable vampire, so she finally finds something she is good at. Sookie finds people weirder than her that value her gift so she is not an outcast for it ... Maybe recent vampire fictions are validating and 'ok-ing' being outsiders, misfits (emo kids, goths). These groups are suddenly finding

themselves cool and 'in'. If you're a bit different that's fine.
(Louisa *True Blood* Interview, 2010)

Fans thus associate Fangtasia London, the *True Blood* television series and the *Southern Vampire* novels with the pleasures of standing out and celebrating difference, whilst also belonging to alternative community groupings. Like Fangtasia London, the *True Blood* universe allows fans to reimagine different potential futures. The possibility of vampires, werewolves, shape-shifters, fairies and humans co-existing together does not necessarily make for idyllic social and political harmony (many sequences with the American Vampire League and the Fellowship of the Sun are evidence of that), but as the following response from Louisa demonstrates, the culture's relationship with the vampire has changed; instead of resembling evil or amoral forces, *True Blood's* vampires offer fascinating potentials for a more interesting, sexy and cool way of life:

Vampires are now objects of desire and cool in a more mass media way, there's almost no fear element now. They seem to represent any oppressed or maligned minority rather than an enemy to be feared. ... We all want to be whisked into a world of amazing vampire creatures who resemble us (unlike werewolves who change from human form) and are beautiful and captivating (unlike zombies), who are cool and powerful and can be fashionable and modern (unlike wizards and faeries). (Louisa *True Blood* Interview, 2010)

Having surveyed entry points into the *True Blood* universe, what can be ascertained about the commodification of the *True Blood* vampire lifestyle? Firstly, *True Blood* merchandise and lifestyle spaces reveal a wider change in the way in which fans engage with their beloved text. As Jenkins's research into transmedia storytelling demonstrates, fans (often facilitated by the producers of these franchises) are increasingly taking their fandom into different contexts and reimagining the novel's or

the television programme's diegesis; the media itself functions as a starting point for playing with who one is. Whilst this is not a new phenomenon – fans of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975, USA) have been doing this since the 1970s, Fangtasia London reveals that fan activities are increasingly aligned with identity and lifestyle practices. Media texts can now be seen as a springboard, as these are not just fan performances but are insights into the self. As Matt Hills suggests during his discussion of fan costuming and the 'invested body', it is precisely through the temporary 'loss of self' – which takes place during the process of fan commodification/impersonation – that ultimately gives rise to new identities, resulting in the expansion and 'unfolding of self' (2002, 166). As 'it is only by passing through moments of self-absence that our sense of self can be re-narrated and expanded' (Ricoeur 1984 in Hills 2002, 167), Fangtasia London demonstrates that fans are not attempting to impersonate characters from the *True Blood* universe but are instead drawing on the show's aesthetics for inspiration in their own lives.

Secondly, the strong emphasis on alternative dress and lifestyle accessories at Fangtasia London, combined with the contemporary fascination with the vampire from fiction to fashion, illustrates a wider sense of boredom or feeling a lack in contemporary culture. Peter Ingwersen, the fashion designer and founder of the fashion label Bblack [sic] Noir says, 'There is a real need to look into alternative worlds. Our taste for the gothic is increasing with its tales of drama, fairytales and dark powers. Everything a reality show cannot give you' (quoted in Magdalino 2009, 76). As Ingwersen illustrates, wearing Gothic clothes and socializing in vampire lifestyle space offers people alternatives to conventional, 'normal' life and the otherwise bleak and comparatively unimaginative aesthetics of the reality television show. The current preoccupation with Gothic, vampire and steampunk fashion and, increasingly, with teasingly sexy burlesque stars such as Dita Von Teese all demonstrate pleasures in returning to the past and finding alternatives for the present and potential futures. Like the burlesque

star's teasing striptease and the painstakingly constructed steampunk gadget, the vampire itself is also all about process. Vampires are associated with seduction; they are about history and about reclaiming a sense of romance, mysticism, fantasy and sensuality in comparison with today's information-rich, throwaway culture. *True Blood's* vampires resemble beauty and eternal youth, but simultaneously convey the power, knowledge and experience that they have accumulated over thousands of years. The *True Blood* universe that is built upon fantasy and magic, with its supernatural creatures from fairies to witches and dramatic story arcs of fairy wars, maenad invasions and the ongoing struggle between vampires and werewolves, provides fans with endless potential to reimagine their own lives.

Notes

- 1 Steampunk originated as a literary subgenre; it has roots in Victorian fiction such as Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869) and H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895); it is a particularly visual form of fiction organized around steam-driven, advanced science and technology, anachronistically retrofitted onto a Victorian-themed world.
- 2 See www3.fitnyc.edu/museum/gothic/ for more details. (Accessed 20 August 2011.)
- 3 See www.illamasqua.com for more details. (Accessed 20 August 2011.)
- 4 See www.store.hbo.com/?v=hbo-uk_shows_true-blood for more details. (Accessed 20 August 2011.)
- 5 See www.etsy.com for more details. (Accessed 20 August 2011.)
- 6 See www.zazzle.com for more details. (Accessed 20 August 2011.)
- 7 This artwork was based on the characterization of the twins in the novels as when fans produced these artefacts the characters had not yet featured in the television series.
- 8 This section is based on empirical data that was collected during periods of participant observation at Fangtasia London, and wider vampire-themed events (organized by the London vampire community), as well as in-depth interviews with *True Blood* fans, and attendees of vampire lifestyle spaces.
- 9 See www.fangtasilondon.blogspot.com for more details. (Accessed 20 August 2011.)
- 10 Both pieces created by Artmafia Chris Sutton.

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