

Danger, excitement, epic love and being special

THE FASCINATION WITH VAMPIRE PROGRAMMES

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An IZI study with 594 vampire fans in Germany and an additional 323 fans from 48 countries around the world (in total 917 fans) investigates why vampire programmes such as *Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are so fascinating to their fans.

A blond, delicate, and apparently helpless girl walks alone at night in the foggy cemetery in Sunnydale. She comes upon a man who first addresses her in a friendly way; then suddenly, he reveals his demonic face and attacks her, baring his fangs, ready to pierce her throat. But what happens next? This young girl, we see, is neither weak nor helpless. She is Buffy, the vampire slayer, the chosen one of her generation with superhuman strength. Before the aggressor realises what is going on, she floors him with sarcastic quip and a wooden stake, stabbed in his heart. The vampire screams, then turns to dust. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is one of the first successfully established vampire series in television. With 7 seasons, up to 5.3 million viewers in the United States¹ and spin-off comic series, it is one of the most successful mystery shows of the mid-1990s. Previously, vampires had mainly been portrayed as hideous objects of people's fears, dread, and terror. This image began to change with parodies such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dance of the Vampires*, or *Dracula Father and Son*, even becoming an aesthetically beautiful object of desires and wishes involving sex and love, violence and brutality, as

seen in programmes such as *Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries*, or *True Blood*.

THE STUDY

Vampire fans can be found in all age groups and are excited by very different aspects of these films. For this reason this international IZI study on the fascination of vampire shows collected the statements of 917 fans between the ages of 8 and 67 in a total of 49 countries. This was possible with the help of an online-questionnaire, asking what was so fascinating about their favourite vampire show. The following is a short summary of the most important findings for the 4 most popular vampire programmes.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*² is the favourite vampire programme of 120 of our surveyed vampire fans worldwide (18 countries), these being between the ages of 13 and 67 years.

The character Buffy shakes up the classic, normative gender role of the helpless young woman. Many fans say that they watched this series throughout their youth; this witty and physically strong young woman who can defend herself from monsters and successfully attack demons and vampires became a role model for them. Especially female fans felt empowered by watching this funny and confident warrior who never gives up and who fights with her friends to save the world. "I feel

more empowered as a woman!," says a 16-year-old US-American girl.

Buffy takes place in a mystical, unearthly world; its uncanniness is staged with a dark atmosphere, mysterious sounds, eerie music, and purposefully placed moments of shock and horror. However, the viewer's fear is repeatedly undermined by the show's creative and humorous staging, sometimes even with cheap-looking backdrops, as well as by Buffy's sarcasm, dry humour, and her innovative plays on words, often with pop cultural references. This humour, coupled with the audience's expert knowledge that there will be a happy ending, invites the viewers to indulge in their enjoyment of fear.

At the same time, fans can identify with Buffy's "normal" life world. This includes typical youth's fears, such as problems at school, coming-to-age as an outsider, family arguments, heartaches, or the loss of loved ones. On this human level, for which Buffy has no special powers, she is often scared of failure and of disappointing her friends and family. A 23-year-old German said that this was why she was able to identify with Buffy: she is a "self-confident, young woman, trying to do the right thing. (...) But because she is not perfect and doesn't always do the right thing, I feel connected to her."

The *Buffy* series also offers a dark, but funny object for typical teenager fears in the form of conquerable demons. Buffy, the vampire slayer, becomes a parasocial friend: a quick-witted, tough, and courageous role model, but also a fallible equal viewers can identify with.

In contrast, *Twilight* changed this genre a few years later to a classic teeny romance, moving away from the spooky suspense and humour of the 1990s and focussing more directly on strong emotions such as eternal love.

Twilight

The 5 *Twilight* movies,³ based upon Stephenie Meyer's bestseller series of the same name, have earned more than 2.5 billion dollars worldwide⁴ to date with female fans all around the world. In this study, 153 fans between 10 and 59 years of age from 22 countries said that *Twilight* is their favourite vampire show. In *Twilight* the 17-year-old Bella and the mysterious and handsome vampire Edward fall in love. This "unconditional and immortal love," as one 14-year-old describes the relationship between a normal girl and a superhuman vampire, is the most important aspect for fans, feeding their desire to become fulfilled in a real relationship of their own. Edward's complete devotion to Bella makes him a romantic hero; he becomes her guardian angel, shielding her from harm. Despite his superiority, he is courteous and sensitive to her needs, and with the help of his telepathic abilities he is very empathetic. He does not misuse her weaknesses, does not care about her failings, and is not interested in other women. "He is exactly like practically every woman imagines her dream man," commented a 27-year-old German, representative of many female fans. Edward even waits for the wedding night, postponing his sexual desires until then. Unlike many teenage boys, his focus is not on sexuality, but rather on eternal love (cf. Ill. 1). Bella, on the other hand, is depicted as an insecure, clumsy young woman, struggling with the completely "normal" problems of everyday teenage life. She is neither idealised nor sexualised, but nonetheless desired and loved. In this way, many girls feel connected to the protagonist. "She showed us that we don't have to be perfect to have

a 'perfect' love," said a 15-year-old Portuguese girl.

Even if many desire a relationship that lasts "forever," only a vampire can truly represent this construct of eternal love. For *Twilight* fans, this deeply romantic love becomes the object of their projected desires for a relationship of their own. While *Twilight* regards sex between vampires and humans as forbidden and even dangerous for the fragile Bella, the sexual component is much more explicit in *The Vampire Diaries*.

The Vampire Diaries

The *Vampire Diaries*⁵ is based on the book series by L.J. Smith. The US-American broadcast of this teenage mystery series currently reaches up to 3.5 million viewers. It is very popular among young audiences, as can be seen, for instance, in the numerous People's and Teenager's Choice Awards.⁶ In the context of this study, a total of 421 fans between 10 and 54 years of age from 27 countries named this as their favourite vampire show. Like *Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries* centres on love. The fans find the main plot especially important: a love triangle involving the (initially human) protagonist Elena, who is courted by 2 wealthy vampire brothers. The extremely good-looking brothers embody the opposing sides of a vampire's existence. Stefan is "good," has "morally correct" human values, and does not drink human blood; Damon was "evil" at the beginning, living out his demonic instincts, and does not hide this side of himself. Through these 2 characters, Elena experiences her first contact with the vampire world. She first falls in love with the gallant Stefan, but later becomes close to Damon. Despite or perhaps due to his role as the evil one, Damon is by far the most

popular character in this programme; according to fans, he is one of the main reasons why they watch the series. He is not only a brutal and unpredictable murderer, but also the sexy seducer par excellence, exciting fans with his mischievous charm and his witty comments. Many female fans see him as their erotic dream man, and one 17-year-old Italian girl claims he is the proof that "bad boys" can be changed by love: "I love Damon Salvatore, because he's the bad brother, and you are just falling in love with him, and then he became good for you and will do everything for his love."

In *The Vampire Diaries* the vampire is again the object of projected deep and erotic feelings, but also of violence, as embodied in the character of Damon. *True Blood* takes this image a step further, presenting sex and violence in a more explicit way.

True Blood

The series *True Blood*⁷ is based upon the *Sookie Stackhouse* novels by Charlaine Harris. In the USA, an average of 4.5 million fans watched the most recent sixth season.⁸ 171 fans from 17 countries between the ages of 14 and 59 reported in our survey that *True Blood* was their favourite television programme. In this television series, vampires have "outed themselves" to humans, and thanks to the production of synthetic blood ("Tru Blood") they can coexist

Not only sex, but also violence is presented in a purposeful and uncensored way in this series. There are numerous brutal and revolting scenes, showing how humans and vampires are tortured, people are murdered, and vampires find “true death,” that is they die “in a gush of blood and nothing is left except for blood,”

peacefully, even if there are often conflicts on both sides. The main character of the series, the waitress Sookie, has telepathic abilities and fights for the peaceful co-existence of humans, vampires, and other creatures.

In contrast to *Buffy*, in *True Blood* it is not the protagonist Sookie whom the viewers are fascinated by, but rather the “bad boy” Eric, the prototypical *True Blood* vampire. This good-looking vampire is brutal, egotistical, and distant on the one hand, but emotional and loyal to those near him on the other. This image is attractive, for instance, to a 17-year-old Australian girl, who sees the “good” core behind the “bad boy” façade: “He is very charming and the majority of the time is the bad ass vampire who you think doesn’t care about anything or anyone, but deep down he has emotions.”

Taboo-breaking erotica plays a central role in *True Blood*, occasionally including extreme practices such as bondage games, suggestive of sadomasochistic pornography. Sex scenes include erotic biting and drinking of blood (cf. Ill. 2), both presented as enjoyable for those involved: “Vampires drink human’s blood, humans drink vampire blood, they get high and have sex,” writes a 21-year-old British woman. This highly erotic depiction of sexual games is attractive to many fans, even if this is expressed in a more conservative, self-censored way by some people in the survey.

as a 34-year-old German graphically describes it. These almost exaggeratedly bloody and brutal scenes provoke less of a feeling of fear than of disgust, according to the people in this survey. The co-existence between humans and vampires is also used as a way to address socio-politically relevant topics such as homophobia, racism, and religion. For one 33-year-old German woman this analogy is typical for this series: “Love between humans and vampires is a reference, for instance, of love between different ethnicities. The vampires are persecuted, and there are prejudices against them. Just as there are prejudices against black people and homosexuals.”

True Blood therefore becomes an object of projection for fantasising about the erotic and uncensored overstepping of boundaries and challenging of taboos with respect to violence and sex, but also with respect to societal issues. Nothing is forbidden because the fictitious world of vampires has a different sense of morality.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that every vampire series has its own specific attraction, especially in the way it deals with emotions. *Buffy* deals especially with humour and fear, *Twilight* revolves around intensive and deep love, and *True Blood* explores aestheticised vio-

lence and disgust. *The Vampire Diaries* brings together love and violence. Except for *Buffy*, with its strong female protagonist, the vampire programmes’ main appeal (especially for female fans) lies in their attractive male characters. Edward is the selfless romantic, Damon is the man whose love helps him bring his demonic side under control, and Eric plays the ambivalent “bad boy.” Fans are fascinated by the way these vampires embody both a dangerous attraction as well as a protective instinct for the ones they love or desire. In general, our findings show that vampires are especially the object of projection for fantasies concerning love, death, and sexuality – as well as a metaphor for societal conflicts. Issues that fans of all vampire programmes are drawn to are eternal youth and beauty, eternal life and the rich experience that one can gain from it, as well as superhuman abilities. ■

NOTES

- ¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffy_the_Vampire_Slayer#U.S._television_ratings [03.03.2014]
- ² Broadcast on WB and UPN, 1997-2003.
- ³ Summit Entertainment 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012
- ⁴ <http://www.filmstarts.de/nachrichten/18472799.html> [13.12.2013]
- ⁵ Broadcast on The CW, starting in 2009.
- ⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vampire_Diaries [03.03.2014]
- ⁷ Broadcast on HBO, starting 2008.
- ⁸ <http://www.quotenmeter.de/n/64418/true-blood-trotz-basketball-stark> [03.03.2014]

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