University of Alberta

The Woman, the Queer, the Monster: Decolonial Approaches to the Other in *Vampire humaniste cherche suicidaire consentant*

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Undergraduate thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Modern Languages and Cultural Studies at the University of Alberta

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Fall 2024

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Introduction

Popularized by Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), a novel heavily inspired by Sheridan Le Fanu's novella, *Carmilla* (1872), the monstrous figure of the vampire is a staple in the horror canon. Even over a century after its most recognizable iteration, this gothic figure remains iconic in contemporary Western media and culture. Traditionally, the vampire is positioned opposite morally righteous human protagonists, a trend that continues even in contemporary adaptations. In such tales, the vampire personifies amorality, a figure representing what is 'wrong' with the given society, and thus tends to die to close the narrative triumphantly for said righteous heroes.

Such a figure, one of often unquestioned corruption on even a biological level, strikes fear both in its adversaries and audiences. This fear relies on difference, on a fundamental terror of the unknown, of something different than oneself in such an uncanny way that even the act of *being* sparks horror. Otherwise known as a fear of the Other, this specific type of fear is central to the gothic genre, acting as a vessel for its classic and timeless monsters.

This concept of the fear of the Other refers to a fear of any figure that exists outside of the "normative standards set forth by dominant social groups [that] determine how behaviors and ideologies are evaluated and which bar they are measured against" (Gaynor 365). Or, someone who does not conform to societal or cultural norms. In the case of the vampire, they are "measured against a human-centric standard whereby having the ability to walk during daylight hours, having a beating heart, and gaining sustenance from nonanimal food sources determines one's normalness" (365), thus positioning them as Other on the basis of their fundamental and biological difference from humanity.

While concepts of the Other in gothic horror are easily redefined in more simple terms of xenophobia, or fear of something unlike oneself, such a definition is an oversimplification. This fear of the Other and the ready acceptance of such prejudice are upheld by remaining colonial ideology and the systems established during and after colonization. Most often, this appears in horror as a fear of reverse colonization, or a fear that "what has been represented as the 'civilised' world is on the point of being colonized by 'primitive' forces" (Arata 623). Such "responses to cultural guilt" (623) depend on that initiating idea of opposite civilised and primitive groups that is often harped on by colonial-era Europeans when discussing North America as in this analysis. These concepts were readily weaponized to justify colonization, viewing it as "replacing one way of life (characterized by savagery and the wilderness) with another (characterized by progress and civilization)" (Andersen and Peters 9). So, as these ideas remain unchecked in the Western psyche, they permeate media tropes, an often subconscious representation of our collective fears, however prejudiced.

However, this elusive and immortal monster is more than just a deadly legacy of the gothic movement and colonially-upheld fear. In fact, the vampire is often considered a queer figure, the reasoning for which is multi-faceted. Vampire texts have historically taken liberties with the Queer, relying on the unacceptability of the Monster to discuss unacceptable sexualities; for example Carmilla is a woman-vampire who is repeatedly infatuated with women. Explicit queerness by societal standards is not the only way in which a vampire may be sexually queer, though, for Dracula is more often than not read as queer as he preys on both men and women, penetrating both with his fangs in a similarly erotic fashion to sex. Queerness in the body of the vampire is not so linear; normative concepts of time are not so applicable to them either, and offer avenues for difference often not considered upon first glance. Vampires "sit on borders and

boundaries, mocking taxonomic and evolutionary discourses" (Stuart 223), or, otherwise stated, vampires simply do not *need* to conform to any human standard: "The queer joke of their existence is to fully engage a discourse that inscribes time into their physical bodies" (223). This idea slips the vampire further into the unknown and leads to a notion of vampiric sexuality as a similarly uncanny concept to that of its very being; there exists a cyclical relationship between the vampire's varying degrees of queerness and its status as Other.

The Queer is a member of the Other by the same aforementioned definition: queerness exists outside said dominant social groups whether on the basis of normative heterosexuality or the cisgender. This conceptualization of the Queer as the Other, however, does not detract from the colonial implications of the Other, but rather suggests ways of deconstruction and means to work toward a decolonial existence in a postcolonial society. Since queerness threatens the "dichotomous and binary thinking" (Hunt and Holmes 159) perpetuated by colonists that is now entrenched in Western society, a decolonial queer politic "seeks to queer White settler colonialism and the colonial gender and sexual categories it relies on—to render it abnormal, to name it and make it visible in order to challenge it" (156). Using this logic, it is possible for the simple existence of queer representation to be decolonial, or, at the very least, a threatening and anti-normative addition to postcolonial media.

Reading the vampire as the Other requires not only acknowledgment of their inhumanity, but also of their inherent queerness as they experience sexuality in a fundamentally queer way. Both readings feed each other: as the vampire becomes less human, it becomes more queer, thus more *Other*, and as the vampire becomes more queer it becomes less conventional, so, too, Othering it even more. This way, the Queer and the vampire are inseparable concepts, colliding at a nexus of unacceptable craving and social anomaly to create a potent allegory for queer

experiences and desire outside of prescribed convention. In the case of the vampire, queerness is all-encompassing, referring to its rejection of humanity in all facets.

Themes of queerness and subversion of convention are commonly explored in vampire media, so it may seem that this concept couldn't possibly be portrayed with any novelty. However, French-Canadian writer and director Ariane Louis-Seize proves this wrong by delivering a charming and fresh take on the subject through her debut feature film: the comedic coming-of-age horror film, *Vampire humaniste cherche suicidaire consentant* (2023). The film follows Sasha, a 68-year-old teenage vampire as she grapples with the undeniable reality of her existence as a vampire who is too sensitive to kill, and Paul, her willing victim-turned-life partner. Through the narrative's exploration of Sasha's aversion to her biological reality and the lengths she will go to to remain true to herself as an empathetic vampire, *Vampire humaniste*… serves as a significant and transformative addition to the genre.

Not only a very original concept, this film is subversive at its core through its depiction of Sasha's inability to perform and eventual rejection of the vampire's most organic function: killing. It subverts the subverted, taking further the notion that the "monster, marked as 'other' in various ways, function[s] as a figure of subjectivity that could work as a device to police accepted socio-symbolic boundaries, but also potentially to transgress and subvert them" (Guttzeit 281). Through its transformative approach to the traditional figure of the vampire, the film delivers a decolonial take on concepts of the Woman, the Queer, and the Monster, and challenges audiences to reconsider their perception of Othered figures as they exist in media convention.

Queering the Woman

At her most conceptual, the Woman is already Othered, a figure removed from the man whose subjugation under patriarchy is necessary to her acceptability in the eyes of convention. Due to her presupposed position opposite a man, the traditional depiction of a woman character is relatively non threatening, an often necessary addition to a narrative for the purpose of establishing and upholding manufactured narratives of male superiority and strength. A woman's adherence to expected submission in media depictions allows her to become palatable as an example of feminine desirability within the systems that oppress her. Thus, any deviation from this prescribed norm immediately posits the Woman as *queer*. She is different, a threat, Othered even further from the normative perspective.

The vampire is a culturally pervasive presence, a physical embodiment of deviance and twisted desire that make it, too, an Othered figure. More often than not, the vampire is malicious or villainous in some way, its threatening nature stemming directly from the things that make it different to begin with. When the Woman and the vampire come together and their Othered bodies combine, their deviance compounds and creates a new axis of identity wherein "[f]emale vampirism is doubly 'other'" (Jönsson 35), or, the woman-vampire is no longer simply woman and vampire, but rather a unique morphological entity.

> "The girl vampire, then, is all about collapsing boundaries: between the young and the ancient, between parent and child, as well as the boundaries of fixed identities. The lure of the vampire is its very corporeal ability to be any- one at any given time. In the flux that is the heart of the vampire lies the uncanny but compelling question whether any identity is ever more than an intricate patchwork of masks and doubles: reflections, as it were, in a dark looking-glass." (44)

The woman-vampire challenges the cultural perception of the Woman, and puts into question what specifically makes a feminized version of the vampire terrifying, the answer to which is always the dual Othering process: she must be dually feared to be considered whole. Her existence depends on both the subversion of the meek woman and the non-threatening human. She unquestionably threatens both concepts in traditional iterations, a betrayal of womanhood in the same way she betrays the human.

While *Vampire humaniste*… presents a woman-vampire protagonist, its narrative deviates from traditional depictions of such a figure, subverting the negative connotations most frequently associated with the woman-vampire. On the surface, this film can be read as an exploration of the transitional phase between girlhood and womanhood, hence its use of the coming-of-age trope. However, a deeper and more complex narrative purpose reveals itself when examined through the lens of alternativism and self-acceptance outside social norms. Our vampire is not to be feared, a fact made clear right from the start when Sasha is unable to feed, immediately subverting our aforementioned and already-subversive idea that the woman-vampire is twice as frightening. Her vampirism is treated as a starting point rather than a deviation itself, a fact that allows her room to grow into her own unique identity that happens to go against vampiric norms.

The real subversion of gender stems from Sasha's own personal struggle with her existence as a vampire and her undeniable thirst for blood: she is too sensitive to kill. According to the doctor that her parents, Aurélien and Georgette, take her to upon discovering her condition, Sasha's inability to feed is due to an abundance of empathy. Empathy is the source of conflict *and* an overarching theme in the film, both instigating Sasha's problem and, eventually, becoming the solution. The film's introduction posits empathy as the enemy of Sasha's survival, and thus the enemy of vampires at large. Whereas empathy for humans is abnormal among

vampires, this is not the case for a conventionally depicted human woman. In conventional depictions of the Woman, the woman and the child are most often seen as at least amicable, if not a unit. It is expected and accepted that a woman would relate positively to a child, and that her most 'innate' characteristics should shine through in her interactions with them. The woman-vampire, however, is often set apart from her human counterparts by shedding this connection: woman-vampires are not traditionally empathetic. This is most often shown through their nonexistent or negative relationships with children and inability to bear children due to the vampiric condition.

> "The vampire's consistent positioning against the child is fundamental to its identity, to the queer surplus that seeps through narrative attempts at (en)closure. As such, the vampire's immortality can be read as a possible futurity outside of reproductive futurism, a futurity that resonates with what Edelman identifies as an 'ethical register outside the recognizably human'" (Lau 8).

Though *Vampire humaniste*…'s plot shows that it is possible for a woman-vampire to bear children through the implied biological status of Sasha's family, it remains true that empathy is a distinguishing factor in this film–just not in the expected way. Rather than distinguishing between the woman and the woman-vampire, Louis-Seize takes it a step further and uses Sasha's empathy to *challenge* vampiric norms, thus employing empathy to distinguish Sasha from vampires, too, rather than only from the Woman.

Sasha's identity doubles down on the traditional queerness of the woman-vampire, a concept important to understanding how *Vampire humaniste*… subverts media conventions, as she is shown to be *too* empathetic. Her empathy, however, is not ever shown to be toward children, as might be the expectation; it is universal and integral to *her* identity, rather than

hinging on something external such as a child. Through an understanding of processes of the Other, we know that the female vampire is queer in her separation from humanity and from womanhood. However, through Sasha, the queer identity of the vampire is then queered: it becomes a subversion of its own subversion as she embodies empathy, the very thing the woman-vampire traditionally rejects, as a form of alternativism. She does not return to womanhood in her empathy, she takes on an alternative way of being that is *more* than just vampirism or personhood.

Sasha's acceptance of the alternativism required to live her life comfortably outside of vampirism's prescribed norms through her decision to 'humanely' harvest blood from end-of-life patients at their death presents another example of subverting the Queer. In reference to lifestyle, vampirism in media more often than not *already* presents new, different, or 'queer' ways of living:

> "Figuring a fantastic immortality and a decidedly queer life/time, the vampire confounds assumptions about the worthy life predicated on dominant ideologies of temporality and invites a consideration of other ways of living, other ways of being. Constituted by queerness—predominantly by an affiliation fixed through images linking same-sex desire, blood, contamination, and death but also by an unmooring of gender signifiers across a range of polymorphous desires—the vampire finds formal resonance in a tightly formulaic and highly intertextual genre, a genre whose conventions limit its narrative development." (Lau 3-4)

Though her life as a vampire from birth places her outside of societal norms to begin with, Sasha's existence is queered further by her denial of conformity. She chooses to act as a final agent of death for those already dying, opting to reject the acceptable standard for vampires in

the same way ‘normal’ vampires reject human lifestyles. Thus, instead of signifying a return to the Woman through a traditionally accepted form of empathy, one that ties her to personhood, Sasha’s rejection is uniquely related to her vampirism. By rejecting the human *and* the vampire, she becomes a third thing, an unknown. Her identity is unique in reference to those around her–she is not human, but she is not *just* a vampire. Her identities intersect as she adopts a queerness that applies exclusively to her and as she deviates from vampiric convention.

Sasha’s empathy serves another purpose in the narrative: it posits her, the Monster, as a positive figure. The vampire is an objectively supernatural figure, an Othered being that serves as a foil to the human form. A vampire is meant to be feared, but *Vampire humaniste*… ensures that its audience can undeniably identify with its vampire. Not only will an audience root for her success because she is the main character, but they will root for her because she acts in ways that challenge their perceptions of vampires in general. Traditional examples of woman-vampires in media are manipulative by design, often employing femininity and sexuality to lure victims to their demise. This is a product of their threatening status as the Other, an attempt to place them back into prescriptive roles under the male gaze.

Even in its existence outside such norms, *Vampire humaniste*… does lean on certain aspects of these conventions to show just how different Sasha is. For example, when Sasha’s cousin, Denise, lures JP, her unwitting victim, home from a bar to feed on him under the guise of having sex with him, Denise portrays an example of the conventional roles that Sasha is attempting to escape. Conventionally, woman-vampires have a unique ability to make victims suffer through their womanhood–their expressions of sensuality and sexuality both traditionally feminine, submissive and soft, and acutely apt to confer suffering on the victim. They are always entrenched in a polarizing romance: “À travers l’incommunicabilité […] de cet amour entre deux

êtres dont l'un est enfermé dans l'innocence, l'autre dans le péché apparaît l'attraction inexorable des contraires, ultime expression […] du caractère paradoxal de la nature humaine" (Lozes qtd. in Roldan 151). Essentially, a key feature of the woman-vampire is her positioning as a sinful predator who is at once weak in her womanhood and inherently more powerful than her victim due to her irresistible, albeit twisted, vampiric attractiveness. Sasha refuses this convention, however her rejection of this characteristic does not in any way take away from her existence as a vampire. Not only does she not kill, but she doesn't resort to seduction even when she is 'forced' to try. Even in the face of pressure, she strives to cause the least amount of suffering possible, even at the cost of her own life. The cultural perception of feeding or killing as the integral trait that makes vampires fearsome is challenged here, the narrative instead treating it as an unfortunate side effect of Sasha's existence.

To elaborate further on the concept of female sexualization in depictions of woman-vampires, in an article addressing Anne Rice's woman-vampire, Claudia, in *Interview with the Vampire* and Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, Gabrielle Jönsson comments that "[a]lthough Claudia's objectification is at first glance subtler than the objectification of the female vampire in post-Draculean film adaptations of Carmilla, she is secured as an object of exchange in her doll-like demeanour, contained within Louis' narrative, and incapable of becoming a subject without his constant assistance" (38-39). Here, Jönsson highlights a pattern of objectification that seems to compound the female sexualization of the real human world into something more sinister once it enters the Othered realm of the vampire. *Vampire humaniste…* does not attempt to sexualize Sasha in this way, in fact, it seems Louis-Seize steers completely clear from any explicit indication of romance or sexuality even when Sasha *does* feed, which tends to be the place when the usually unacceptable female sexuality of the woman-vampire is on display the

most. *Vampire humaniste…* resists the media norms of a sexualized woman-vampire in its subversion of the genre, only depicting it to show what exactly Sasha rejects in the form of Denise. Rather than feed into misogynistic and overdone depictions that attempt to reduce this dually-Othered figure, way is given instead to a much more rich and nuanced understanding of Sasha's character outside her 'urges'.

Queering the Queer

The Queer, just like the Woman, is inherently deviant. Rather than threatening only the man, though, the Queer threatens the fabric of society even in its most basic manifestation. Due to their equally disruptive nature, it makes sense that vampires often serve as vessels for queer desire.

> "[T]he vampire 'punctures the life/death and generative/destructive bipolarities that enclose the heterosexist notion of being' (4) through queer desire; especially important here is not simply the vampire's puncturing bite, her capacity for ontological wounding, but also its enduring effects. Again, it is the vampire narrative's surplus of queer desire that facilitates its resistance to closure—its resistance to singular meaning—and that resistance ensures an ongoing, repetitive disturbance of the social." (Lau 8-9)

At their core, vampires are queer beings. Even in heterosexual depictions, the intertwined nature of feeding and sex forces them under a queer lens, sexuality and nonlife meeting at a nexus of forbidden desire and necessity. When such concepts are then truly queered, when concepts of homosexuality become central and compound into each other, the queer has no place to go but *more queer*.

Though *Vampire humaniste…* does not explicitly treat issues of queer desire in any explicit form, its narrative draws striking similarities to thematic or subtextual ideas of queerness, whether in its resemblance to a 'coming out' story, or its positive depiction of non-mainstream ways of living. Through this potential allegory, we see Sasha rejecting convention in search of a life that better suits her unique situation, an idea that fits best into a queer lens.

Sasha's main struggle on screen is to feed, but on a deeper level she is coming to terms with her inevitable independence and adulthood–however that looks for a vampire. She may be 68, but she is very much a teenager both in looks and mannerisms, and lacks the fundamental knowledge and wisdom to truly be considered that age (or an adult at all). As many coming-of-age films do, *Vampire humaniste…* focuses on a main character who deviates from expectation: in Sasha's case, her inability to feed sets her apart. Though a vampire's feeding and a human's eating are parallel necessities, the narrative's treatment of feeding implies far more. In the act's depiction as a rite of passage to form a very traditional coming of age story, it is discussed in terms that starkly resemble those often used to address sexuality. Feeding, in this context, is not something as inherent as eating despite fulfilling the same canonic function, due to its narrative repurposing as a rite of passage.

Sasha's arc in the film mirrors many modern depictions of sexual awakenings, discoveries, and coming out tropes, such as those in popular films *Love, Simon* (2018) or *But I'm A Cheerleader* (1999), both of which follow queer teenagers. This comparison transforms Sasha's development through the film into an extended metaphor for queer self-discovery and acceptance: as Sasha comes to terms with the reality she is facing, one where she does not fit the standard, she searches for a way to thrive without compromising what makes her fundamentally

different. This progression is essentially the same for queer people coming to terms with the ways their lives will change due to their queerness.

Sasha's childhood dependency on her parents to feed is normal, and can be likened in this case to a human child's typical development. Children typically do not experience urges quite like adults do–their view of life and relationships is limited to the platonic and familial, as well as their perceptions of the romantic through their parents. Similarly, Sasha had not yet experienced the hunger of an adult vampire, she had only observed feeding as modeled by her parents. Thus, when Sasha is unable to mimic her parents in order to feed, a stark allegory forms. Her fangs do not come down, showing that she is not only mentally and emotionally unable to feed, but physically inhibited as well. Sasha's fangs not coming in can be paralleled to the discovery of one's non-heterosexuality in that both of these concepts directly conflict with the expected course of one's life. While the possibility of this being an allusion to asexuality by mirroring the concept of not getting aroused is comical and on the nose, the specific queer identity it draws comparisons to is largely unimportant, as its narrative significance remains the same.

With this potential allegory in mind, it is possible to analyze Sasha's actions through a doubly queer lens: as discussed, she is already queer in her vampiric womanhood, but is also queer even in her allegorical expression of sexuality. Vampiric sexuality as depicted in the gothic uncanny is hypersexual as the act of feeding is presented as inseparable from sexual desire. In *Dracula*, for example, "the blood [Dracula] needs, both for sex and for food, always belongs to somebody else" (Stevenson 147); the connection between sex and feeding is in the presence of another, the dependence on a second party's presence in an intimate space. This is not *untrue* in *Vampire humaniste…*: we see the need for food and expression of sexuality, even inauthentic, as

intertwined. As mentioned above, Denise even tries to teach Sasha to lure men home to feed on them, a clear textual example of the link between vampiric sexuality and feeding. Nonetheless, despite the intertwined nature of these concepts even in the canon of this film, Sasha resists: herein lies the allegory at its core.

Even in the queered space of vampiric sexuality, Sasha is subversive. Not only does she reject the prescribed sexualization of the woman-vampire as mentioned above, but she seems uninterested in her role as deliverer of "a fantastic, vampiric queer immortality" that opens up "the possibility of living in the face of death in dramatically different ways" (Lau 10). Sasha only feeds 'properly' twice in this film: once when she defends Paul from his tormentors by killing the ringleader, and once when Paul finally convinces her to turn him. The first time, she is so distraught over the action she has taken that she swears it off forever, and the second time she is only acting out of care for Paul's best interests and in hopes of living a life within which she may be able to make peace. Neither time does she crave the act, nor does she ever intend to replicate it. In fact, it is implied that once she turns Paul she never feeds 'normally' again; she never returns to the sexually charged act of killing, the *norm* of vampirism, thus subverting an already queer concept.

As discussed previously, mainstream society is constructed on heterosexual relationships and expectations of reproduction. Convention struggles to see value in any 'unproductive' lifestyle, wherein reproductive futurism is either not considered or bastardized. This way, definitions of sexual acceptability are challenged by vampires even in their most traditional forms. Vampires inherently deny the "easy slippage between life and time, between linearity and reproduction, [that] translates into an appeal to the worthy life predicated on heteronormativity, and such an orientation asks both life and death to serve productive and reproductive ends" (Lau

3). At their core, vampires threaten the very essence of conventional human sexuality and encapsulate queerness in their usual inability to reproduce. However, *Vampire humaniste…* subverts even this rejection of convention. As mentioned earlier, it is possible for vampires in this universe to bear children, as seen through Sasha's very existence, however this does not inhibit expressions of queerness from shining through in the narrative. Sasha still shows a rejection of sexuality at its core, and thus, if Sasha and Paul are read as a nontraditional 'couple', it would still have merit as a source of Othering.

Though appearances would imply that Sasha's subsequent partnership with Paul is a heterosexual one, Louis-Seize invites audiences to rethink this assumption. With the denial of vampiric sexuality at its most carnal, Sasha has shown that she is largely uninterested in the norms of life as a vampire. On top of this, her empathy and rejection of traditional tropes of the woman-vampire suggest a much more queer reading of her relationship with Paul.

While Paul's canonical belonging to manhood is not debated in this analysis, I would like to draw attention to a sort of equivalent effect elicited by his relationship with Sasha and that of the sapphically involved woman of *Carmilla*. The vampire-human relationship presented in *Carmilla* is shown to have a threatening and destabilizing effect on the power of the male throughout the narrative: "female homosocial bonds potentially carry tremendous power to subvert or demolish existing patriarchal kinship structures, which is precisely what happens in 'Carmilla'" (Signorotti 609). Through Sasha and Paul, a similar effect is elicited in *Vampire humaniste…* on the normative forces under which they live. Their relationship possesses a *queer* status despite its outwardly heterosexual appearance, due in part to their initial human-vampire status, that threatens to and eventually succeeds at changing the family dynamic within which Sasha was raised. It is implied that it is because of her empathy and insistence on engaging with

Paul that her parents eventually accept her deviance from vampiric norms and allow her to feed alternatively for the rest of her non-life, thus drawing a parallel to the way *Carmilla*'s primary lesbian relationship disrupted the prescribed structure of her household.

To elaborate on the queerness of Sasha's vampiric empathy, we see, too, a subversion of the idea of suffering within the film. Though Paul, Sasha's willing victim, is suffering, it is not by Sasha's hand. Paul is deeply depressed–and suicidal, as the film title suggests–so when he meets Sasha she is actually in a position to help him by granting him the death he desperately desires. Even so, she hesitates to kill him and is unable to do so because she is so afraid of causing him harm, even forcing him to come up with last dying wishes to fulfill in hopes of alleviating her anxiety, to no avail. This challenges the aforementioned idea of the vampire as a sinful figure, one whose proximity yields unavoidable suffering (Roldan 151). Paul's position as a willing sacrifice to Sasha's 'cause' is motivated by his suicidality, which is shown to alienate him–or Other him–from his peers, thus pushing him, too, into a queer lens. Sasha and Paul's dynamic blurs the lines between predator and prey, pushing the boundaries of what is conventional to vampiric relationships. Paul is not attempting to drive Sasha back into prescripted vampiric existence even by imploring her to kill him, instead he is encouraging her to find a way to exist outside of it through consensual killing.

Though their relationship seems to evade traditional romantic definitions, there is of course merit in regarding Sasha and Paul as a heterosexual couple. Even in this analysis, however, queer elements arise. Conventional depictions of heterosexual relationships posit the woman as the more openly emotional counterpart, as well as the more openly affectionate or caring member of a given relationship. *Vampire humaniste*…'s relationship, however, sees Paul, the man, acting more affectionate and attached, while Sasha, the woman, takes a more indifferent

position, rejecting Paul's 'advances' that take the form of requests for her to kill him. Though adherence to this standard is much less common in contemporary media due to its roots in misogyny and the patriarchy, it is still worth noting how deviance from such convention may lean into queer interpretation. When read as a couple, Sasha and Paul seem to possess many similarities to the fictional Addams family's parental unit, Morticia and Gomez Addams.

In the article "The Monster Within: The Munsters , the Addams Family and the American Family in the 1960s", discussing the Addams and Munster families' nonconformity to familial standards in 1960s television, Laura Morowitz states that what "was strictly forbidden between 'normal'[…] couples was permitted for the already deviant" (46). Essentially, she explains that the relationship dynamics between each parental couple of *The Munsters* (1964-1966) and *The Addams Family* (1964-1966) were able to be nonconforming to television's standards due to their pre-established alternativism. For example, "Gomez and Morticia [Addams] were the first married couple on television who seem to actually have a sex life. [Their] romance [is] unceasing and in the grand manner […] the slightest look or word sends Gomez into raptures" (46), an idea that translates roughly over to Sasha and Paul if read as a heterosexual couple. Paul seems to be more invested in his relationship with Sasha, as exemplified by his trailing her around or his insistence on her killing him (which could be interpreted as his undying willingness to prove his love to her), whereas Sasha is more collected and offers only restrained affection in response to his more grandiose offerings.

Not only would this be a reading of the heterosexual as queer in terms of conventions, but also in terms of Sasha's vampirism. As established, the vampire is inherently queer. If Paul were to genuinely fall for a vampire, such love would be deemed forbidden by society's expectations. The vampire is "[u]ne monstruosité recherchée, admirée et convoitée tant que cela reste dans le

domaine de l'amateur. Le monstre contemporain semble être celui de la tentation […] des fantasmes érotiques de l'hors-norme et de l'extrême qui fascine par sa singularité" (Ragazzini 34). Paul's initial belonging to the norm through his humanity shifts his interest in Sasha into something subversive, a desire for the inhuman *because* of her monstrousness rather than in spite of it.

Sasha and Paul's relationship is not the only one in the film that can be read through a queer lens. Sasha's family dynamic is also unique, and can be explored through a similar lens to Morowitz's analysis of the Munster's and Addams' family units: "In a similar manner, the [Addams and Munster] families thwarted the dominance of the nuclear family by reintroducing the extended model" (44). Both families lived with and interacted regularly with members outside the traditional 'nuclear family' framework, similar to the dynamic in Aurélien and Georgette's family: while the aunt and cousin, Victorine and Denise, do not live with them, they are often around and can be considered to be part of the family unit. Denise even takes Sasha in when her parents want her to learn to live 'normally', showing a deviation from traditional family models. Since "[n]uclear families played a central part in the constitution of colonial power and the production of colonial geographies" (Phillips 240), Sasha's family's existence outside of that prescription structure becomes an inherently decolonial one, yet another example of how a queer existence can be decolonial in its subversiveness.

Just as the Munster and Addams families, *Vampire humaniste* "call[s] into question traditional family roles, once again undermining the prescribed borders of the […] family" (45) by assigning the metaphorical breadwinner role to Georgette. This assignment is an unconventional one, as the concept of stay-at-home mothers and housewives is still common even in contemporary media. Georgette, however, is the one who hunts for the family, which

calls back to Morowitz observation that “Lily and Morticia also break other gender rules of the 1960s housewife: at least once each seeks employment outside the home. In ‘Morticia, the Breadwinner’ (1:26), Morticia turns the tables by becoming the breadwinner” (46). This not only separates them further from societal standards, but also doubles down on the inherent queerness of the vampire by subverting expectations even in mundane areas of life.

Queering the Monster

Built, too, upon the unknown, the horror genre is a challenge to define. Taking inspiration from social and cultural fears, the genre regularly reinforces negative perceptions of the Other in a plethora of forms. In the Western world, this fear is lasting and chronic, often rooted in and perpetuated by colonially upheld prejudice or xenophobia (see Introduction) that has permeated not only ways of life but the culture itself. While horror has a frequent ability to challenge certain social norms through its “more progressive, in many ways, [disruption and] subversion of gender [and] sexual/heteronormative norms” (Hall 313), it is not *all* progressive nor inclusive:

> “The horror film, more than any other genre, provides a glimpse […] into the horrors of settler colonial violence, but it also rests on a promise of white settler family and community survival, and the erasure of Indigenous Peoples from present and future worlds.” (313)

Over the course of the contemporary horror genre’s development, a dichotomy between more traditional ideas rooted in colonialism and more modern ideas that criticize such culturally-entrenched colonialism has emerged: “Horror may disrupt, in some ways, but it is still produced and consumed by audiences who are mired in a colonial system that works by obscuring its many layers and workings” (314). It can be argued that horror today exists on a

spectrum between these concepts, each film falling in a unique place between classical adherence and deviant subversion to form a unique statement about society and humanity.

Vampire humaniste…'s place on this spectrum is significant not only due to its reading as decolonial through its subversions of the woman and the Queer that "actively [challenge] or [disrupt] systems of knowledge that do not fully account for the lives of […] queer and trans people, and many others whose lives are erased through epistemic and material violence" (Hunt and Holmes 159), but also its existence as a postcolonial Canadian film. Mainstream Canadian culture remains influenced by colonial ideology, a lasting effect of the colonization of Indigenous groups across the country by French and English settlers still so fresh in Canada's history; given horror's simultaneous role of criticism and reflection of cultural fears, it would be remiss to ignore a more traditionally postcolonial analysis of the film.

In horror, the figure of the Monster is often "[c]odified as Indigenous, through [the] stereotypical […] construct of the 'savage,' namely killing" (Hall 315), which could be extrapolated, in the case of the supernatural, to *vampirism*. The postcolonial vampire becomes a vessel to reflect the fears a settler society might hold toward Indigenous people as a "stand-in, punishing […] people who are the real colonizers" (315). *Vampire humaniste*… subverts this fundamental concept, that of the evil savage and the righteous settler, through Sasha's empathy.

In its refusal to vilify Sasha's vampirism, *Vampire humaniste*... presents Sasha with a peculiar sense of morality that positions her outside the concept of the 'savage'. Her empathy is a central facet of her character, pushing her into a space of dual queerness as discussed above: this subversion inhibits traditional interpretations of her Otherness as a threat. Sasha's refusal to kill rejects any interpretation of the Monster "comme un être irrationnel à travers lequel se perd l'entendement, se délivre l'imaginaire et le sensible" (Ragazzini 28). She rejects the inherent

desire for blood in favour of her conscience and forces audiences to reconsider what really makes her scary, if anything remains to fear at all. She is not an enemy of humans, rather she is committed to a queer part of herself that separates her from traditional narratives of vampirism.

Though the plot focuses on Sasha's aversion to killing, and thus her hesitancy to abide by vampiric conventions, she never once attempts to *rid herself* of her vampirism. As mentioned above, Sasha's empathy is what separates her from the conventions of vampirism, but instead of shoving her back into a 'human' role, it acts as a subversive force that makes her *more queer*. She exists as an opposition to the media patterns that suggest that the "concept of good and evil is a positional one that coincides with categories of Otherness" and that the Other should be feared *because* they are Other (Jameson 115 qtd. in Hollinger 148). From a postcolonial lens, this is significant because the narrative does not pose vampires as a problem nor a lesser group that should be vanquished due to difference even when its central conflict stems from the complications of vampirism: Sasha is not something to be feared. She is not evil, nor is her Otherness depicted as "alien, different, unclean, and unfamiliar" (Jameson 115 qtd. in Hollinger 148). Not only does it refuse to vilify the Other, *Vampire humaniste...* actually celebrates deviance and alternativism through Sasha's differences.

Rather than subscribe to the aforementioned narrative structure of vampire versus human, *Vampire humaniste...*'s conflict occurs between a vampire and an intangible problem since Sasha has been pointedly separated from the concept of the 'savage'. Traditionally, our human character, Paul, would represent the colonial mind due to his 'normative' existence, but instead he is an *ally*. He is committed to dying for Sasha. His motivation at the start is his own depression and suicidality, but this does not take away from his overarching intention to help Sasha. She is the Other, and Paul is still willing and ready to assist.

The idea of a unitary force combining human and Other subverts traditional depictions of vampire-human dynamics, which tend to show a distinct separation between the two 'groups'. For example, Stoker's *Dracula* "maintains the position of the vampire as evil Other […] through its epistolary narrative technique […] The ideological outcome of this narrative method, of course, is the exclusion of the voice of the monstrous Other from the novel; that is, it keeps the outsider on the outside […] The inhabitants of its narrative world are neatly divided into 'us' and 'them'" (Hollinger 149). The decolonial aspects of Louis-Seize's narrative shine through in a comparison to, arguably, the most formative piece of vampire media, as it demonstrates the outright rejection of the feared Other so strongly present in Stoker's work. *Vampire humaniste*... integrates and focalizes the vampire as a complete character, rather than an inherently villainous concept to be 'dealt with', usually through religion to some extent.

As Christianity was one of the most common tools of colonial violence, it, too, is one of the most common motifs in vampire fiction and serves as yet another example of colonial influences in the horror genre. Whether it be holy water or crucifixes, Christian implements are traditionally presented as some of the only things that can hurt vampires, alongside sunlight and garlic. Because of this, one would expect that a vampire film taking place in one of Canada's most Catholic provinces would uphold such symbolism, but it does not. Evading expectations yet again, Louis-Seize brings up the Church only once when Sasha says she is, essentially, allergic to the Church. We do not have any clear indication of Paul's religious leanings, however it can be assumed that he has grown up at least culturally Christian in some form, due to his location and demographic. It can be argued, though, that his suicidality has altered his relationship with religion, altogether removing him from religion and potentially turning him to atheism. This notion is reinforced by his indifferent reaction to Sasha's positioning as, for all intents and

purposes, an enemy of the Church when she states that she is allergic to church. This response challenges yet again the prescribed idea of interactions with the Other: though Sasha is likely someone Paul may have been taught to fear for her aversion to Christianity, he does not ever exhibit a negative attitude toward her.

Paul's religious indifference serves yet another purpose when placed parallel to Sasha's exclusion from the Church. Yet again, Louis-Seize is offering more similarities between the two, confounding further their roles as vampire and human: "The similarity between 'us' and the Other feeds the sensation of the uncanny and forces the acknowledgment that the Other is closer to 'us' than our desire to separate and delineate would have us admit" (Mutch 82). Not only have the prescribed narrative roles of threat and threatened been subverted, but the lines between them have been blurred. Paul's nonadherence to Christianity would be a choice, whereas Sasha's is forced by her biology, thus pushing Paul into a more 'amoral' role–in the eyes of a colonially-minded society–in his purposeful deviance.

While Louis-Seize's film demonstrates many more subtle subversions to standards in the genre, it can be argued that the most important is its denial of traditional fears of reverse colonization, as discussed above. While many texts, such as *Dracula*, establish fear of the vampire through the imposing threat of the vampire's "urgent need to take, to violate boundaries, a desire that must incorporate foreign blood for the very survival of his kind" (Stevenson 147), *Vampire humaniste*… denies its audience such a simple categorization. Sasha resists her biology out of empathy, wills herself to queer the meaning of vampirism in her own non-life, thus refusing to abide by those vampiric needs. She does not threaten reverse colonization, and she is not a threat to humans, barring her single kill (see Queering the Queer): Sasha fundamentally

denies the notion that her status as Other makes her fearsome, challenges an audience's immediate instinct to fear a 'monster' on the basis of difference.

Furthermore, *Vampire humaniste*… actually suggests a certain acceptance of reverse colonization, in a stark rejection of the genre's convention. For example, Stephen D. Arata posits that in "the marauding, invasive Other" of *Dracula*, "British culture sees its own imperial practices mirrored back in monstrous forms" (623). When discussing Sasha and Paul, this forceful imposition does not exist. Rather, Paul implores Sasha to grant him the status of Other. This posits a settler's worst nightmare, becoming the Monster, as a positive. Not only does this demonstrate an unexpected acceptance of the Other, but it also challenges ideas of what exactly makes the Other fearsome. The vampiric monstrosity that "lies in their queer denial–predicated on morphic bodies–of eugenic futurity" and inspires "anxieties of temporal collapse usually associated with Gothic physicalities" (Stuart 224) is fabricated, a result of covert prejudice in text that prescribes the vampire the role of the Monster on the basis of difference. The notion that a monster must be feared at all costs when it can *turn* humans–or bring them into Otherness–because it may cost their humanity or change the body entirely is rejected by Paul. He views the human and the vampire as not all that different. His acceptance of his new existence even before it becomes his reality rejects colonial fears of reverse colonization entirely. Through him, *Vampire humaniste*… portrays Otherness as a positive–instead of *fear* of reciprocal influence from Indigenous peoples, the film implies it may be a *good thing*. Paul thrives in his new life, in his existence as a Queer vampire, as does Sasha.

The body in this case is *queer*, and thus decolonial, a celebration of what is *Other* rather than a reluctant victim. Louis-Seize's insistence on vampirism as a positive in the eyes of a human further rebukes the notion that "[l]a monstruosité est un écart entre le vivant et le non

vivant, entre le corps stéréotypé humain et celui indéfinissable et polyforme du monstre" (Ragazzini 29), depicting it instead as an existence outside of convention that is not a threat to the human body. While Paul is no longer *human*, the essence of his character does not change. The monster *is* defined, it is tangible and well-understood, a denial of culturally entrenched, colonially-upheld anxieties. In its queerness, *Vampire humaniste*… strips down the uncanny nature of the Monster and implores viewers to see Sasha as friend rather than foe, somehow dually akin to human and vampire all at once. In her subversive queerness, Sasha is shown as nothing to be feared.

Conclusion

A charming horror-comedy on the surface, Ariane Louis-Seize's *Vampire humaniste cherche suicidaire consentant* (2023) does not hesitate to dig deep into the mechanics of the gothic uncanny and what truly makes the vampire fearsome upon further examination of the figure as a reflection of our cultural anxieties. The woman-vampire is already a subversive entity, one that challenges concepts of gender and sexuality at their very core, but as Sasha's life transforms on screen, the film becomes a decolonial piece in its queerness.

Not just a copy-paste sexuality-is-her-weapon badass, the character of Sasha invites us to reconsider what the vampire means and where it can go as a symbol of Othered bodies in our larger cultural climate. Through its subversive approach to the traditional figure of the vampire, *Vampire humaniste*... delivers a critical take on concepts of the Woman, the Queer, and the Monster, and challenges audiences to reconsider their perception of Othered figures as they exist in media convention.

The subversion of both the human woman and the woman-vampire exemplified by Sasha demonstrates how rejection of humanity does not require a stereotypical objectification of the woman. Louis-Seize provides a whole and nuanced character without leaning on harmful tropes constructed to separate the woman-vampire from the human woman. Sasha is not sexualized, nor is she unempathetic, placing her at a unique nexus of vampire-hood and womanhood. Her existence outside both human and vampire norms enables a much more fruitful exploration of what exactly constitutes a vampire, and shows that perhaps the woman-vampire and the woman do not differ in ways once assumed.

Building on Sasha's rejection of vampiric gendered tradition, her subversion of relationship expectations is, too, more nuanced. Rather than forcing her into a mold of homo- or heterosexuality, *Vampire humaniste*… gives her room to grow. In an active embodiment of queer gender and sexuality, Sasha takes back her agency in pursuit of happiness that fits her own values and reflects an "ongoing resistance to colonialism" (Hunt and Holmes 159). She is granted the grace of development, of exploring her identity outside of prescribed norms, which pays off with the blossoming of a new take on vampiric survival. With Paul by her side, she pushes the envelope and implores audiences to consider why vampires are fearsome in the first place if their predation is not always as inherent.

These ideas collide in the film's complete renunciation of traditional horror tropes upheld and inspired by colonial fears in a postcolonial landscape. Rather than persecute the Other, *Vampire humaniste*… celebrates it. The central narrative follows vampiric discovery rather than good versus evil, then goes further by allowing vampirism to thrive in the end, removing itself completely from the colonial notion of victory over the Other. Treating the vampire as easily sympathizable rather than as an unknown enemy, Louis-Seize pushes back against the colonial

roots of horror, her film breaking through as a decolonial subversion of a figure so commonly punished to reinforce colonial ideology in the genre.

The figure of the Monster as a fearsome villain is not as prescriptive of a concept as media convention suggests. In fact, "[s]upernatural species offer the potential to decolonize our familiar habits of thinking, particularly our unwitting complicity with forms of cinematic and televisual realism in reifying political realism" (Hudson 662). This film portrays no fearsome Other, presenting instead a collection of reminiscent features of many nonconforming figures: the Queer, the Woman, the vampire, the deviant teenager, all of which are radically accepted within our protagonist. In the end, they are all normalized and treated positively rather than as threatening deviations. This morphing of the norm and the Other lends itself to the rejection of the colonially-upheld perceptions of the vampire, the Queer, and the Woman as inherently monstrous.

The monster is less prescriptive than convention leads one to think–in fact, it is incredibly subjective: "Nous sommes tous le monstre de quelqu'un, de quelque chose. Moralement ou physiquement, l'autre est le monstre" (Ragazzini 31). Rather than preoccupying itself with the precise differences between the human and the vampire, the human and the Other, the queer and the nonqueer, and so on forever, *Vampire humaniste cherche suicidaire consentant* (2023) implores audiences to rethink what is so deeply wrong with the Other on every scale.

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