

Grave Expectations: Vampira and Her Audiences, 1954-1956

Phil Oppenheim

It's nearly 11 p.m. on a slow Saturday night. You're on the couch, watching two bums slug it out in an interminable boxing match as the night draws to an end. Too lazy to get up and change the channel but too bored to shut off the TV and go to sleep, you drowsily watch as the final bell mercifully ends the fight. As you begin to drift into sleep, the screen goes black: in the distance, an eerie figure starts to emerge from the foggy depths. As it moves towards you, it becomes clear that it's a woman - or at least something *like* a woman, with a feminine hourglass shape, though one more exaggerated than any you've seen before. The pale, angular creature dressed in a low-cut tattered shroud pauses, terror-struck; she places her hands, whose fingers end in blade-like long black-polished nails, on either side of her face. Her eyes, framed by unnaturally painted arched eyebrows, go wide with fright: she opens her mouth and lets loose a blood-curdling scream. 'Screaming relaxes me so!' she smiles, with perverse glee. You have been invited into the lair of Vampira. Consider yourself interpellated.

From 1954 to 1956, Vampira, television's first horror-movie host, frightened and delighted Los Angeles late-night viewers. Although they seem mostly to be lurking in the shadows in most cities nowadays, TV horror hosts - ghouls, vampires, mad scientists, and assorted other creatures of the night - once were a prominent feature of many local television markets throughout the United States. Vampira, created by actress, model, painter, and raconteur Maila Nurmi, established many of the norms of the genre, including direct address to the audience, ironic use of humour as a counterpoint to the films' scares, late-night scheduling, low-budget theatrical films packaged for maximum profitability, local merchant sponsorship, and more. Vampira was more than just a TV character, though; in framing horror and mystery films with irony, and championing - and mocking - B and Z grade films that would otherwise have been forgotten, she established herself as an avatar of oppositional taste, one of the original articulators of

the paracinematic/trash aesthetic. Vampira defined what 'midnight movies' were and would be for generations of film fans, and if the blogs, zines, books, songs, films, and conventions in her honour are taken into account, she has clearly become a bona-fide cult icon.

But before she was an icon she was simply Vampira, the weirdly sexy glamour ghoul who made grisly jokes and made fun of scary movies on a local LA TV station. And to begin to understand what her character has become and the influence she has had, it is imperative to understand what she *was*; more precisely, we need to begin to inquire about those viewers who watched her show, how they watched it, and how they incorporated their understanding of Vampira into their everyday lives, their aesthetic and taste sensibilities, and the creation of their identities. Were her show on television today, this would be an intensive but achievable undertaking: scholars could design an array of audience studies, from participant-observer to ethnographies, from psychoanalytic speculation to materialist studies of deleterious industrial effects on unwitting consumers. In the case of Vampira, though, such approaches are problematic: not only are her audiences unlikely to remember their original reception of her programme (and even less likely to recall their experiences of it untainted by the hazy glow of nostalgia), but the programme, which was telecast live and was unrecorded, does not even exist anymore, so that one-time viewers cannot be reintroduced to the show (and scholars cannot even conduct textual analyses if they wanted to).

My research on Vampira tries to navigate these issues from a different direction, attempting to begin understanding this pivotal figure's audiences via historical reception, discovering how her fans became cult followers. In this paper, I bracket the time period of the mid-1950s for this study, focusing on the years in which Vampira's show actually aired; also, I focus mostly on a small sample of reception within her station's geographic reach, the city and environs of Los Angeles, and exclude nearly all of the national media attention her show attracted. I could not study her actual audiences, of course; what I attempt instead is to use public discourses - specifically, newspapers and magazines - to study how Vampira was constructed for a variety of popular media consumers.¹ What

kinds of audiences did these strange late-night programmes attract, and what kinds of pleasure did it provide or elicit from them? How did Vampira's audiences use her weird, unconventional programme? Is it possible that Vampira, whose show, I will suggest, seems to oppose mainstream tastes, standards, behaviours and sexuality, has emancipatory potential, or can provide some kind of role model of popular alternativism? My study attempts to begin answering these questions.

In general, I follow Janet Staiger's lead and guidelines in studying the traces of media events, focusing on different 'modes of exhibition, several modes of exhibition, and several modes of reception' (2000: 21), and her reliance on public discourse (as in consideration of film critics' reviews of *Silence of the Lambs*, 2000). Staiger's work runs through my study on yet another level, embracing her idea of audiences' 'perverse' reception to media. For Staiger, perverse spectators don't do what we expect them to do, and 1950s Angelenos' embrace of the bizarre Vampira, who seemed to represent the opposite of everything we assume to be true of the era, certainly qualifies on this score as perverse. Staiger uses the term 'perverse' in order to remove connotations of audience deviance as necessarily morally or politically superior or laudable, or a challenge to the status quo; instead, her 'perversity' highlights 'the wilfulness of the spectator while also avoiding the implicit, but false, conjunction that doing something different is necessarily politically progressive' (2000: 32). Of course Staiger is right, and one cannot assume that all deviance is emancipatory; on the other hand, I think in the case of Vampira, and the character's reliance on fetish-wear and other alternative sexuality, it might be appropriate to include other meanings of perversity that Staiger rejects. Lastly, Staiger believes that audiences do not want to see themselves or their behaviour as deviant, and that they may form social groups to combat perceptions of their perversity; 'One way to reassure oneself that one is not perverted is to find a community of others - a subculture of like-minded individuals who mirror one's own nature' (2000: 181). I would maintain that Vampira created and interpellated a community of fans; the public discourses I examine reveal glimpses of this community of perverts who have a taste for the unconventional.

Lastly, it is important to recognize that Vampira was a *weirdo* (as was Nurmi too, for that matter). Helpfully, J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum concur, and label her a ‘professional Hollywood weirdo’ (1983: 20) in their landmark work *Midnight Movies*; in a later treatment of *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, the authors refer to her as ‘the beatnik ghoul girl’ (1983: 265). ‘Weirdo’ is a term that originated in the mid-1950s,² according to most online etymologies; and while the precision of that date seems debatable, it is clear that its evocation of beatnik/hipster lingo places it sometime in that historical moment. Weirdo, for me, captures shadings of the Uncanny, fate, destiny, and precognition (as in the example of Macbeth’s witchy Wyrld Sisters), and marries these meanings to the offbeat, unusual, and the hip. Challenging lazy assumptions about the 1950s once again, Vampira stands in for a pantheon of mid-century weirdos, kooks like Little Richard, Pinky Lee, Miles Davis (who recorded the song ‘Weirdo’ in 1954), Ed Wood, Bettie Page, Irving Klaw, Liberace, Ken Nordine, and many more. Weirdos presented an alternative to (supposed) cultural hegemony, and, by their example, provided a way around repressive social norms. As Maila Nurmi herself bragged, ‘given my own mad-bop heritage... we shook a staid society to her very foundations. Darlings - yes, we did. Well, at least we unloosed her hairspray’ (1983: 28). Of course the weirdos didn’t shake society all by themselves: what the presence and popularity of weirdos in the 1950s proves is that there was an *audience* for their weirdness, and that the supposedly all-pervasive consensual conservative ideology of the era had plenty of dissidents.

And now, dim the lights and cue the fog machine: it’s time for Vampira.

Vampira was the brainchild of Maila Nurmi, a Finnish immigrant who spent her twenties as a New York showgirl (appearing in Mae West’s Broadway extravaganza ‘Catherine Was Great’, Nurmi claimed) and a subject of cheesecake photography (most famously captured on film by the oddball genius Weegee, but more typically in the pages of men’s ‘adults-only’ digests).³ In 1953 she decided to try to become a Hollywood phenomenon, and, dressed in her interpretation of the ghoulish matriarch of Charles Addams’s famous *New Yorker* cartoons (later named Morticia for television), wowing the crowd at Los

Angeles's Bal Caribe costume masquerade ball and catching the attention of Hunt Stromberg Jr., the programme director for ABC's local affiliate station. Tracking her down like a Transylvanian Cinderella, Stromberg hired her to host dusty late-night mystery and horror films; being mindful of not ripping off Addams (she was an admiring fan, after all), and wanting to create something of her own, Nurmi created a sexier, weirder version of the character, cinching her waist to an incredible 17 inches (a Guinness World's Record, according to Nurmi, 1983) and adding cleavage and fishnet stockings to Addams's more demure character.⁴ She added her low-register, emotionless vocal delivery, cynical wisecracks, trademark introductory scream, and malevolent charisma to the mix, and Vampira was vivified. Vampira hosted and mocked the low-budget fare she featured, and her show became an instant local success. *The Vampira Show*⁵ aired on KABC-TV from April 30, 1954 to December 7, 1956. After being cancelled - because of her refusal to sell off the character she created and owned to Stromberg and the station, Nurmi sometimes claimed - she reappeared on the Los Angeles independent station KHJ-TV. Her second show lasted from May 18, 1956 to December 7, 1956. We still hadn't heard the last of Vampira, though: she appeared in a handful of films through the late 1950s and early 1960s (sometimes billed as Vampira, other times as Maila Nurmi), and, most infamously, agreed to appear in Ed Wood's notorious anticlassic *Plan 9* (although she claimed to insist on having a non-speaking role, as she thought the script was lousy). Generations of cult movie fans have adored her in 'the worst movie ever made', but Nurmi lived in relative obscurity for the rest of her life, working odd jobs, recording a punk single with Satan's Cheerleaders in 1987 (!), and ultimately owning an antique store called 'Vampira's Attic'. Maila Nurmi died on January 10, 2008.

How did Nurmi's bizarre character play in LA? How did local reporters contribute to her metastasizing cult status? Among local journalists, the *Los Angeles Times*' television critic (and occasional gossip) Walter Ames was Vampira's biggest admirer, if we judge affection by the number of times he referred to her in print. Ames provided brief programme notes for at least thirteen weeks of her show - or one out of every five weeks

Vampira was on the air - teasing viewers with hints of her many of her theme nights, including her Deathday Party, Bad-Will Tour, Thanksgiving with Young Tom Vulture, and Christmas Chopping 'specials'. Ames occasionally offered greater details of the week's show; an episode during which Vampira serves up a parodic 'marriage between ghouls' gets a lengthy dose of 'advance dope':

A bridal bouquet of poison ivy will highlight Vamp's attire which will include something old, a corpse; something new, a hydrogen bomb; something borrowed, a head, and something blue, her own complexion (1955b: 26).

The wedding story was accompanied by a (typically) bizarre image of Vampira adjusting a veil fabricated from a few sticks of dynamite and detonator wires. In addition to providing notes for her own programme, Ames also promotes Vampira's guest appearances in other shows, both local (*Jukebox Jury*) and national (*Saturday Night Revue* with George Jessel). One of Ames's programme notes has the air of premonition; 'Vampira plots destruction for her sponsor' he explains in his column on January 8, 1955 - four months before KABC cancelled the show (1955a: A5).

While these brief mentions serve to convey the flavour of Vampira's show - as well as her darkly parodic sensibility - some of Ames's longer pieces reveal more nuanced insights into her character and her relationship to viewers. The first extended coverage that Ames provides begins with an acknowledgement of her growing popularity among Angeleno wits: 'Hollywood's newest TV queen isn't in any danger of running out of gags. Everyone around her seems to have suddenly turned gag writer' (all quotations 1954a: 30). Ames has an exclusive, though - a sit-down, in-person interview with the lady herself (identified as 'really Maila Nurmi, who is married to TV Writer Dean Reisner', and who in turn is 'embarrassed by the notoriety his 'spook' wife is getting'. Ames refers to Nurmi throughout the remainder of the article as Vampira. For their face-to-face, Vampira does not disappoint either Ames or his readers' expectations:

For our meeting Vampira showed up in a deathly black turtle-neck sweater, black slacks and sandals that were highlighted by her lavender-painted

toenails. As it is on the show, her face was chalk-white which, naturally, gave her an eerie look.

The accompanying photograph unfortunately does not feature her footwear (or more sadly, her feet), but does highlight a scowling, condescending headshot. Vampira proceeds to describe her past employment history (that is, *Nurmi's* history, as attributed by Ames to 'Vampira') from hat-check girl to 'lady bellhop', and ends her pre-television tale describing the 'off-the-shoulder billboard' she wore. Its message: 'I'm neurotic and can't work. Please help'. Nurmi's quirky eccentricity and Vampira's Otherness become one again, as actress becomes subsumed by her self-created alter ego, and she leaves her lunch date with a 'ghoulish grin' and a 'slinky exit' that will put 'at least two men sitting on the counter on the water wagon'. His programme note at the end of the piece acts both as an invitation and a warning: 'stand back or Vampira will get you'. Ames has become bewitched by their meeting, and suggests that she will have some profound effect - if only a turn towards teetotaling - on his fellow males in the audience.

In other columns, Ames admits that 'I'm a Vampira fan', watching the KABC show for her appearances and ignoring the movies she hosts (1954b: A5): he admiringly quotes her description of her parodic 'pine box jury' segment and concludes 'This girl is NOT for real.' Ames reports on a variety of her stunts: her new cocktail concoction that dissolves any container it's poured into, her run for Night Mayor of Hollywood, parodying the local honorary ceremonial title,⁶ her nomination for the Television Enemy Award, spoofing the character's actual Emmy nomination,⁷ and more. An anecdote Ames relates demonstrates Vampira's audience appeal beyond the scope of a smitten television reporter:

On her show Saturday night Vampira invited her ghoulish night owl fans to meet her at Hollywood and Cahuenga Blvds. Following the show, she admonished them to bring food. One hunter, fresh from Ventura County, showed up with an oversized ox bone. It was the hit of the evening (1954c: 28).

The account of this proto-flash mob illustrates how Vampira's fan base could be mobilized (or at least appear to be mobilized, for Ames), and it also marks her fans as alternative viewers ('night owls') and a little weird themselves (and brandishing bovine bones). Lastly, the detail of the hunter suggests that Vampira's most ardent supporters may be men, and, at their extreme, as cartoonishly manly as Vampira is exaggeratedly feminine.

Ames's longest piece about Vampira served as a brief eulogy for the newly cancelled show, but more pointedly as a head-scratching analysis of the whims of television executives. His March 29, 1955 column, 'Vampira Vanishes From the Air', expresses his frustration with shows being cancelled 'under one's log without any notice' - and more bitterly, with the notion of 'station operators' feeling 'that they can hold an audience even though they cancel out the star' (all quotations 1955c: 28). Ames describes for his readers how he tried to get some answers about Vampira's unexplained, last-minute disappearance (she was axed on the Friday before her Saturday telecast) from KABC, but came up empty handed: 'We were told not to say anything about it,' one flack, who shall remain nameless, told me'. Ames helps his readers become savvier about television by sharing his frustrations with its capricious, secret machinations. His auto-analysis of the way he acted as an audience for *The Vampira Show* also addresses television's institutions. 'This is the one programme', he writes of Vampira, 'and I'm sure there are thousands of the same mind, that I tune in just for the commercials, the pictures having already run the treadmill of TV'. Vampira achieves what *all* programmers - from the 1950s to today - dream of: her content was sticky, holding audiences' attention throughout the duration of commercial interruption. Even more provocatively, if other audience members' consumption of her show paralleled Ames's self-reported experience, Vampira solved the problem of the rerun: her show demonstrated that adding unique, compelling framing content - what Derek Kompare (2005) would later describe as the 'distinctive repetition' of cable television, for instance - to re-tread programming could prolong the lifespan of acquired (and thus cheaper) programming.⁸

Ames's final column featuring Vampira - which once again uses a glamorous headshot of her gazing directly and dispassionately at the viewer - announced that 'my favorite ghoulish friend' was returning to television, on KHJ (all quotations 1956: B10). Ames's coverage allows Vampira to employ her trademark hailing device to signal fans that she's back, 'I'm so happy I could scream', she beams, and creates an opportunity for her to explain her new show - and its satirical target. According to Ames, on her new show Vampira is abandoning the shadowy streets of her former life; with her new home, she 'wants her fans to think of her as the average friendly neighbor they would expect to find living halfway up the swamp'. 'I've undergone a grave change' Ames quotes Vampira, 'My motto now is 'home sweet homicide'. In a television marketplace in which programmers tried to convince viewers that the traditional families of shows like *Father Knows Best* (launched in 1954) and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (premiering in 1952) were The American Norm, Vampira provided something different: a funhouse mirror that prompted, for her select audience, scepticism via barbed humour in opposition to the family sitcoms of Prime Time.

Unlike Ames, The *Independent-Press-Telegram's* television writer Bert Resnik distanced himself from Vampira fandom, bringing a jaded scepticism to the subject and the character. Most surprisingly, he reveals that Nurmi's 'publicity corps like to surround her with an air of mystery... They object to use of her real name'; after citing her name and a sentence-long biography, he gloats, 'Objection overruled' (all quotations Resnik 1954: A3). Affecting the hard-boiled air of a macho newspaperman, Resnik at first condescendingly reduces her to a Spillanian dame: 'She's a good-looking doll, the kind you'd look thrice at in a show-girl chorus line - though a bit hippy. But she's heads and hips above the chorus line now'. Resnik continues to focus on her physicality, in a way that manages to be both ogling and dismissive: 'On television, she has a 17-inch waistline, 38-inch bustline and 38-inch hips. She frankly admits that the narrow waistline is built into the costume.' The photographs accompanying the article emphasize Resnik's contrariness versus his colleagues regarding Vampira. Unlike nearly every other article covering her, this piece offers Vampira with her eyes *shut tight*, arms

submissively aloft with her palm facing us as if in surrender, with the power of her dramatic cleavage and waist somehow robbed of their usual power; the second image features her photographed from the back (Resnik calls it a 'rear-view picture'), face pointed away from us and toward a wall, though, as the caption drools, 'fans will recognize the hour-glass figure of the little ghoul who made good in the city.' In addition to reasserting his male control over her potentially threatening body, robbing her of its transgressive force, Resnik attempts to critique the commercial impulses behind Vampira too. He admits that her 'commercial introductions are undoubtedly the main reason people tune in... and sit through them', and explains to his lay readers, '[t]hat, in TV-land is the apex. For when a gal can get you to dial in on a commercial instead of out, she's got moxie to mortgage.'

Resnik's debunking ultimately has a surprising result: his piece allows Vampira/Nurmi to speak for herself without mediation, providing opportunities for her to express her (and her character's) oddness and opposition to norms (and tellingly, Resnik relents to Vampira's command after all, and, over his 'objections', defers to her by using only her character's name throughout the remainder of the article). Now that she's famous, for instance, people who formerly would not invite her to parties put her at the top of the list, as guest of honour; 'she always says yes. Then she doesn't show up.' Resnik portrays Vampira as a successful businesswoman who is lining up record contracts and network deals,⁹ and even her fake Vampira-branded 'fingernails, long and gorifying, are sell[ing] like mad.' Resnik lets Vampira explain that her goal is to ultimately become an evangelist, telling readers that 'the world needs an attractive woman evangelist.' The last few paragraphs give Vampira a soapbox, allowing her to articulate her weird charisma: 'I have a hypnotic power, a tremendous personal magnetism. The larger the crowd, the stronger I carry./ It takes fantasy, imagination, drive, nerve./ I have a sense of the theater, showmanship.' Resnik seems stunned into submission at the article's end, offering only three words of assent: 'She has that.' While his article might have attempted to expose television's artifice to his readers, and tried to dismiss Vampira as another Hollywood broad with big bosoms, wide hips, and little else, he winds up proving something else: Vampira, Maila Nurmi, or whatever she calls herself, is a self-made,

self-aware, self-actualized weirdo, and unlike anyone else around (or at least on TV).

Local gossip columnists, who centred their reporting more on the high-society members of Los Angeles community than on the Hollywood glitterati, also found column-inches to devote to Vampira, mostly as a personage that walked among them rather than someone who existed on-screen alone (and, notably, virtually never as 'Maila Nurmi'). Art Ryon, the titular ham of the 'Ham on Ryon' column, reported on Vampira's divorce, using the event as an excuse for 'witticism' but also framing the story in familiar terms for her audience (and one assumes, his as well): 'If she charges cruelty, we'll scream...' (Ryon 1955: A5). The following summer, Ryon reported that a Santa Monica civilian who saw an in-costume Vampira on the street in Hollywood eating an ice cream was 'still aghast' at the sighting, but it is clear that the witness, Ryon, and Ryon's readers would be delighted to see their local celebrity in her - and *their own* - native environment (Ryon 1956: A5). Gene Sherman, who profiled the smart set, local politicians, and the occasional celebrity in 'Cityside',¹⁰ coined the clever portmanteau 'televiper' to describe Vampira (1954a: 2), and also managed to capture the perverse sex appeal of the character for his readers; his ogling description suggests that his readership included men as well as women, the commonly assumed audience of gossip. Under the bold heading 'DIE LAUGHING' Sherman pronounces Vampira

probably the hottest character on the air... the gorgeously macabre dish that slays 'em in the aisles late at night. And no publicity men in town are having more fun than KABC-TV's, who turn out black-bordered releases headed with a picture of Vampira lounging on a coffin (1954b: 2).

Sherman's piece suggests that he thought that his audience would be as intrigued by Vampira's necrophilic imagery as he is. James Copp, who covered the same beat as Sherman and Ryon under the Romantic banner 'Skylarking', captured a few Vampira sightings too. One story in particular addressed – comically - a different threat that Vampira posed, to his specific audience. 'You beach club mammas will be interested to learn', he reports, 'that a few afternoons ago the woman known as Vampira... changed

to bathing attire in one of the kids' cabanas. Later posed with the kids for a *Life* photographer...' (1954: C5). Our previous gossips hinted that wives might best shield their husbands from Vampira's bewitchingly perverse charms; here, Copp suggests that *mothers* might best hold their kids close to them when she's around too, positioning Vampira as a threat to two aspects of their femininity, sexual and maternal.¹¹

As Los Angeles society reporters took note of Vampira, so did high society itself. In particular, when social sets held costumed galas, Vampira became a popular character to impersonate, and there were many women who were intrigued enough by her look and demeanour to try the role out for themselves, if only for one night. Junior Chambers of Commerce, P.T.A.s, 'Spinster Balls', City College Faculty Follies (Long Beach), all had Vampiras wandering in their midst, with local journalists dutifully taking and publishing photos of debutantes, housewives, and other civilians done up in Vampira's provocative garb. In one example that describes the phenomenon, Mrs Frank McCue, of San Mateo, appeared as Vampira at a haunted house dedicated to the Children's Health Home in October 1957;¹² she and other members of the Junior Auxiliary collected proceeds for their 'work on behalf of the mentally retarded', as reported under the period-perfect headline 'Relax, It's Not Sputnik - Just Witches Brewing Up a Storm' (Anon. 1957: 4). The article appeared under the column heading 'Women of the Times', a section of the paper championing local women and, I suspect, read mostly by women as well. Her published image is as many column inches long as the story itself, and twice as wide, and it captures her in Vampira regalia from her knees to her head. Lest readers not immediately apprehend that Mrs McCue wears her costume well, the caption helpfully (and leeringly) points out that 'Under the black wig and shroud, Vampira is the auxiliary's pretty Mrs Frank McCue Jr., and even in this getup, it's obvious why she's a professional model.' Vampira's unmistakably sexual look and persona seems perfectly acceptable for society women to assume, if only under the alibi of charity functions and Halloween, but it is clear that her unconventional, provocative character had both familiarity and popularity among *women* as well as men. Although no interview exists to prove it, I would suggest that assuming Vampira's aspect might in fact be liberating for some of these women, ladies whose social roles would likely prohibit

open displays of alternativity, sexuality, and weirdness. The most famous Vampira-masquerader of the era was among the attendees of Sonja Henie's 'fabulous' party at Ciro's in 1955. Many celebrities were in attendance, but almost everyone was 'overshadowed by the appearance of Zsa Zsa Gabor as the TV character, Vampira' (Schallert 1955: 31). Gabor, of course, was hardly seen as noncontroversial or asexual - by the time of the Henie party, she had already burned through three of her nine husbands, notoriously and publicly cheating on the latest of them (George Sanders) with international playboy Porfirio Rubirosa (Kohn 2001: 149)¹³ - and it is fitting that she assumed the identity of someone who was equally glamorous and notorious as she was, creating a black-haired, alternative doppelganger of herself,¹⁴ parodying her well-known haute-couture man-eater persona with the skin-tight tatters of a bloodsucker.

In LA, Vampira was more than a TV character; she was part of the local community as well. As more proof of her role beyond the box, she appeared in sections of the newspaper not devoted to entertainment and gossip, as more of a popular icon than just the woman who hosted movies when everyone was supposed to be asleep. 'Farmers Market Today', a promotional advertorial written by 'Dick Kidson' (a pseudonym for the *Los Angeles Times* sports columnist Ned Cronin (Cronin 2009)) and designed to attract customers to the famous market at the corner of Fairfax and 3rd Avenues, dedicated two columns to Vampira visitations. Kidson's construction of Vampira's character carries special weight from a unique perspective, as his column is designed specifically to attract readers and lure them as shoppers to the Market. Even more specifically, Kidson is trying to convince *women*, the likeliest buyers of grocery items and the tchotchkes on display. Consequently, Kidson begins his first column spotlighting Vampira by noting that

There is a gal on television who is making a mighty good thing out of using cosmetics in reverse. Name of Vampira. Affects a get-up that highlights the more gruesome qualities of a female spook. Vampira is the only woman we know who carries a haunting license (all quotations Kidson 1954: 4).

Kidson's column exploits the oppositionality that Vampira's character embodies: in 'reversing' her cosmetics, she becomes gruesome (and not beautiful) and less female (the root of the 'haunting license' pun). Such a tactic might seem to steer women away from the Farmers Market rather than pull them into it - why would any woman want to look *gruesomer*? - unless one assumes that women knew who Vampira was and what she looked like, and understood that she was still beautiful, if in an extremely unconventional way. Kidson's column, then, did not intend to scare prospective shoppers away from the Market by threatening them with becoming ugly, but tried to attract women into the shops with the promise of exoticism, unconventionality, and the lure of the perverse.

Later in the same column, Kidson explains how audience members should prepare for their Vampira viewing. Simply watching Vampira could be risky: 'Only one thing you have to be careful about while watching Vampira. Be sure to fasten your safety belt. Also have a step ladder handy. You'll need one to get down off the chandelier the first time Vampira peeks through the TV tube at you.' Instead of our lazily gazing at performers who try to curry our favour, Vampira gazes back at us, making *us* jump at *her* whim. Kidson wraps up his account of Vampira's visit to the market with her stop by the Contemporary Jewelry Shop and her ordering of a silver cigarette case (coffin-shaped, of course), placing her in a venue marked as traditionally feminine (the jewellery shop) but in her uniquely oppositional way (the coffin). A later column (May 1955) follows Vampira back to the jeweller (after launching the usual collection of ghoulish puns and jokes), describing in detail her weird, unusual accoutrements:

Vampira has some ornaments made up called ear wings. Not rings. Wings. They are fastened to the ear, but instead of hanging in customary fashion these flare back over her head like a couple of landing flaps. She also affects a spectral headdress of sterling silver cobwebs, amethyst warts and a shocking gimmick that consists of a slender silver stiletto that sticks out from between her shoulder blades. She looks like the loser in a dart game (all quotations Kidson 1955: 4).

Her jewellery sounds unattractive and unsexy, and the description might appear to be Kidson's attempt to chase women away from Walter Wright's Contemporary Jewelry Shop rather than invite them into it. What Kidson is selling his audience - the equity he is borrowing from Vampira, to put it into sales terms - is Vampira's individuality, her oppositionality, her coolness. Women don't have to dress or act like Vampira to be as uniquely individual as she is; all they have to do is visit the same store she shops at. As Kidson puts it, daring brave women to visit Walter Wright:

Come over and try some on and if you faint dead away he'll do something about it. His wares are not for everyone -in fact, the weaker among you might not be able to handle 'em - but if you're special enough, you'll find something you'll probably find something as unique as you are.

Two weeks after Vampira's premiere on KABC, Aline Mosby,¹⁵ a United Press reporter based in Hollywood, described the nascent phenomenon for a national audience. Amid the typical sexually charged descriptions of Vampira's physique and appearance are suggestions of the counter-cultural power of the character:

The most terrifying television queen in Hollywood today wears long purple fingernails, a stringy black wig and three bloody scratches above her plunging neckline...four lipsticked 'scratches' allegedly from some visiting bad, are drawn on her chest and she smokes black cigarettes in a long, red holder (all quotations Mosby 1954: 30).

Mosby allows Nurmi speak on behalf of her performance, giving readers a glimpse of her alternative intent. 'Underneath her weird costume', reports Mosby, 'she turned out to be a beautiful blonde from Lapland who hated being a 'wholesome, average girl' and who has a life-long desire to be a sinister siren'. After helpfully explaining with a 'ghoulish grin' that her last name 'Rhymes with wormy', Nurmi reveals that her character is a form of self-expression, a way for her to a release inner feelings of unconventionality. 'I've been a spook ever since I was born', Mosby quotes her as

revealing; 'I've always been odd, fanatic, interested in the macabre. It's so nice to have an excuse for being what I really am.' Mosby notes that even though her husband is 'very embarrassed by all of this', Nurmi's transformation into Vampira has become a huge hit, causing a 'small stampede of amazed reporters' in her office and prompting USC students to name her 'the girl we would most like to be caught dead with'. Mosby's article suggests that Nurmi's embrace of Vampira's alternativity - and weirdness - is a mode of self-actualization that resonates more broadly, a form of feminine re- and self-definition that is effective and infectious (her husband's embarrassment be damned).

One notorious sequence of events covered in Los Angeles local papers provides an opportunity to evaluate Vampira's local audience appeal by contrasting her character with another intended to duplicate her success. Programme director Stromberg realized that he'd had a hit on his hands with Vampira, and he figured that he could package another collection of dusty old films and similarly build a show around the cheap product with another host. In December 1954 KABC premiered 'Voluptua and the Love Movies', an assortment of romance movies hosted by the titular bombshell. Gloria Pall, who, like Maila Nurmi, had been a pin-up girl for a variety of men's magazines, became Voluptua, a sex goddess designed to generate viewership and attract sponsors; instead, her show was cancelled within two months.

Why was Voluptua unable to recreate Vampira's success? The local papers suggest that the show was 'too sexy' for television, though that seems too limited, simplistic, and easy an answer. The *Daily Review* introduced Voluptua to its readers in an, um, revealing article and pictorial. The headline wrapped Voluptua in a bow: 'Latest Gift to T.V. Viewers: Buxom Blonde in a Negligee' (all quotations Anon. 1954: 18). Voluptua is 'bosomy' as well as buxom, in the *Review's* estimation, and her routine is clearly marketed as a burlesque routine, relatively sanitized for television. She replaces Vampira's hailing scream with a kiss smacked onto the TV screen upon her introduction; after welcoming the viewer 'to my boudoir... Our special hideaway', she proceeds to remove her negligee, undressing behind a 'lip-shaped screen' during the films' commercial breaks, and finally 'emerging wearing only a man's pajama top' at the end of

the show. She plants another kiss on the camera and waves good-night. The *Review* helpfully compares and contrasts the two movie hosts' shticks:

The famed Vampira is an apparition in tatters, long fingernails and stringy black hair who sits on a tombstone, strokes skunks and spiders and introduces old horror movies... While Vampira fondles a skull and drinks witches' brew on her show, Voluptua chats languorously on a jewel-studded gold telephone trimmed in mink. The telephone 'rings' with a voice that sighs, 'Voluptu—a-a-a'.¹⁶

Voluptua, who 'upon investigation... turned out to be an ex-show girl', was, unlike the complex knot of Vampira's oppositional appeal, simply a sex toy sold for heterosexual male delectation and consumption, a one-joke, one-audience show. Of course the *Review* dutifully provided a picture of the Voluptua (who was described in the body of the story - in the name of journalist accuracy, one assumes - as 5 feet 9 inches, 39-24-37 inches), captioned 'Bit of Sugar for the Mayor', in which Pall, the 'TV sweetheart' who sits next to Lakewood Mayor Angelo Iacoboni, wears a sleeveless, low-cut dress, and dutifully, with downcast eyes, 'pours cream in his coffee'.

Voluptua also toothily smiles in a photo accompanying the Oxnard *Press Courier's* story that appeared five weeks after the *Review's* article, though this time she appears to be discussing a 'new TV job': as the headline explains, succinctly, 'Voluptua Fired, Letters Say Too Sexy' (all quotations Anon. 1955: 2). Unlike Vampira, whose viewers did not seem to complain as she prepared toxic poison cocktails and plotted gruesome deaths for audience members of her show, Voluptua was greeted by letters that 'flooded her station', complaining that 'she was tearing down Hollywood morals'. 'Indignant complaints by church groups, the Parent-Teachers Association, and similar groups' provided an example of the ultimate negative viewer response: a demand for cancellation. The newspaper allows Voluptua to speak for herself, and she 'insists' that her 'gowns were really very modest... and everything I said and did was perfectly innocent. The people who wrote in just misconstrued my motives.' The *Press Courier*

sets its readership straight, though, and contradicts Voluptua's assessment with its own: 'She peddled her sex between reels of a late movie, wearing suggestive gowns and speaking in a low, smouldering [sic] voice.' In their article, Voluptua 'can't understand' why anyone would object to her, as all she intended to do was 'to bring them lots of love and they didn't appreciate it. I thought sex was here to stay.' Of course sex *was* (and is) here to stay; Voluptua, not so much.

Tedd Thomey's eulogy for the cancelled Voluptua in the Long Beach *Independent-Press-Telegram* also served as a panegyric, of a sort, for Vampira (all quotations Thomey 1955: A-17). The headline offers several questions about the role Vampira might have played in Voluptua's demise – 'Did Vampira Cast Evil Spell? Who's a Zombie? And Who's a Witch?' - and the body continues its provocative line of inquiry: 'Did bosomy Vampira put a hex on her bosomy rival, Voluptua? And is that why Voluptua was fired from her love-and-kisses role last week on TV's Channel 7?' Thomey suggests that the battle of the 'brunette Vampira' and the 'blond Voluptua' was a squaring off between the 'mysterious mistress of murder and mayhem' against 'sweetness and light' - and in a surprising reversal of Snow White-ish narrative expectations, the dark, uncanny, weirdness that Vampira represented triumphed. Vampira, suggests captions under photos of the golden-tressed Pall and the black-haired, black-dressed, black-fingernailed Vampira, might have 'cast a spell' to get her TV rival, 'the Victim of a Hex', 'bumped off the air.' Thomey quotes Voluptua's explanation of being 'too sexy', but seems more interested in exploring the suggestion that Vampira's supernatural shenanigans may have been responsible. Thomey recalls that during a recent interview 'Vampira cited several instances of her psychic powers.' In grim anecdotes, Vampira tells of 'foreseeing' the death of an elderly fisherman as child and 'predicting' the death of her sister's infant as an adult. And when she 'predicted angrily' to her friends that Voluptua 'wouldn't last more than a few weeks', her prophecy 'turned out to be exactly right'. Whether or not Vampira's witchcraft somehow caused Voluptua to perish, it is clear that their characters clashed in cultural terms. Vampira, the polysemic weirdo whose uncanny brew of Sex and Death spoke to men *and* women receptive to alternativity, survived, while Voluptua, the monosemic avatar of pliable,

conventional, subservient sexuality, and who spoke only to heterosexual male fantasy, did not. That viewers turned towards the grotesque charms of Vampira and tuned out on the more conventional sexuality of Voluptua illustrates the potential for audience perversity.

As we have seen, Los Angeles writers created a multitude of Vampiras for each of their different audiences. Every article, interview, and advertisement that featured Vampira constructed different pieces of the phenomenon for distinct readerships. In the broadest of strokes, this analysis demonstrated that for LA TV critics, she was positioned as strange, fascinating character that stood apart from relatively homogenous prime time fare, inviting viewers to stay up late for a glimpse into alternativity; for local news reporters, she was articulated as a hipster among the hoi polloi, bringing her bizarre appearance, sexual suggestiveness, and bohemianism to the city's society and local haunts (which were now more haunted than ever); to Hollywood-beat gossip columnists, she was both an alluring, exotic character who starkly contrasted with the typical movie-and-TV stars and provided an example of a countercultural lifestyle for curious readers to explore, and also a perversely sexualized, radically bohemian threat to readers' normal American lives. And as each paratext considered above has proven, the public-discourse reception of the Vampira phenomenon reveals much more in each of its details as well.

As my artificially imposed period and conceptual bracketing suggests, this study barely begins to explore Vampira or the reception of the character, her show, or even Maila Nurmi. I have limited my discussion to Los Angeles-based, popular public discourse during Vampira's presence on television (1954-1956), but of course there is much more to investigate, both in the range of years and texts to study. The Vampira phenomenon attracted the attention of the national media too, and features about her in *Newsweek*, *Life*, *Variety*, and other publications all deserve analysis and consideration.

Also, while this paper has attempted to place the Vampira phenomenon and her

audiences within a historical and geographic context, there is a larger period to which she belongs, and which demands more thought and criticism: the 1950s. In wondering 'whatever became of' Vampira (in a book written in 1982), Richard Lamparski asserts that 'In the 1950s, a time of almost enforced blandness and conformity, she wandered through mist and cobwebs and made a sensation' (286). While it is undeniable that there were real conservative forces in place in the 1950s - most notoriously in the rabid anti-Communism that disgorged itself in HUAC hearings and the ensuing Hollywood blacklist - the 'fifties' were not as monochromatic as certain critics (and politicians) would have us believe. Most obviously, the teenage revolution of horror movies and rock 'n' roll transformed popular culture, but other subterranean forces were afoot as well. Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* (launched in 1953) meshed sophistication (the 'Playboy Philosophy', speculative fiction by writers like Ray Bradbury and cool jazz) with sexuality at one end of the spectrum, while sleazemonger Irving Klaw satisfied a nation of mail-order fetishists with snapshots of Bettie Page (shot by another rebel, Bunny Yeager) at the other end. Jack Kerouac and his fellow Beats revolutionized expectations of what American writers wrote, acted, and looked like; Ornette Coleman, Chet Baker, and Cecil Taylor did the same for audience expectations of what music sounded like. *Mad* Magazine (founded in 1952) defined new American comedy as transgressive, while comedians like Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, and even Rusty Warren, were bringing 'adult' comedy - in several senses of the word - to new, hip audiences.

The fifties were not just a homogenous culture of Ward and June Cleavers - the fifties were also weird. And Vampira, with her grotesque sexuality, her perverse humour, and her championing of oppositional taste needs to be placed among the era's most influential weirdos. And, finally, among the weirdest of the weirdos we must include all of the audiences who watched, wrote about, and read about Vampira: without their interest in this bizarrely liberating character, Vampira would never have existed in the first place.

References

- Ames, W. (1954a) 'Bing to Sub for Injured Son' *Los Angeles Times*, 28 May, 30.
- Ames, W. (1954b) 'KTTV Moves Into Second Spot in Local Ratings' *Los Angeles Times*, 31 July, A5.
- Ames, W. (1954c) 'World Series on Radio' *Los Angeles Times*, 29 September, 28.
- Ames, W. (1955a) 'KTTV Gets Eddie Cantor Video Series' *Los Angeles Times*, 8 January, A5.
- Ames, W. (1955b) 'Sunday Show Plot Stirs Interest' *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March, 26.
- Ames, W. (1955c) 'Vampira Vanishes From TV Schedules' *Los Angeles Times*, 29 March, 28.
- Ames, W. (1956) 'Pinky's Daughter in TV Debut' *Los Angeles Times*, 11 May, B10.
- Anon., (1954) 'Latest Gift to T.V. Viewers: Buxom Blonde in a Negligee' *Daily Review* [Hayward, Ca.], 16 December, 18.
- Anon., (1955) 'Voluptua Fired, Letters Say Too Sexy' *Press Courier* [Oxnard], 2 February, 2.
- Anon., (1957) 'Relax, It's Not Sputnik - Just Witches Brewing Up a Storm' *San Mateo Times*, 12 October, 4.
- Copp, J. (1954) 'Skylarking With James Copp' *Los Angeles Times*, 30 May, C5.
- Cronin, J. (2009) 'The Daily Mirror [Voices]' *Los Angeles Times*, Online, 13 January. <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/thedailymirror/2009/week3/page/3/>.
- Hoberman, J. & Rosenbaum, J. (1983) *Midnight Movies*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Kidson, D. (1954) 'Farmers Market Today' *Los Angeles Times*, 14 June, 4.
- Kidson, D. (1955) 'Farmers Market Today' *Los Angeles Times*, 9 May, 4.
- Kohn, George C. (2001) *The New Encyclopedia of American Scandal*. New York: Facts on File, Inc.
- Kompare, D. (2005) *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television*. New

York: Routledge.

Lamparski, R. (1982) *Whatever Became Of...? Eighth Series*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Mosby, A. (1954) 'Vampira, New, weird [sic] Television Glamour Ghoul' *San Mateo Times*, 13 May, 30.

Nurmi, M. (1983) 'The One - The Only Vampira' *Fangoria*, October, 26-29.

Resnik, B. (1954) 'Ghostess With the Mostest: Vampira Slinks As Glamour Ghoul of TV' *Independent-Press-Telegram*, 22 August, A3.

Ryon, A. (1955) 'Ham on Ryon' *Los Angeles Times*, 12 January, A5.

Ryon, A. (1956) 'Ham on Ryon' *Los Angeles Times*, 20 June, A5.

Schallert, E. (1955) 'Circus at Ciro's: Filmland Turns out for Sonia Henie Party' *Los Angeles Times*, 6 February, 31.

Sherman, G. (1954a) 'Cityside With Gene Sherman' *Los Angeles Times*, 30 June, 2.

Sherman, G. (1954b) 'Cityside With Gene Sherman' *Los Angeles Times*, 11 October, 2.

Skal, D.J. (2001) *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*. New York: Faber and Faber.

Skerchock, J. (2010) *Vampira Unauthorized*. Kearny, NJ: Dark Dungeon.

Staiger, J. (2000) *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*. New York: New York University Press.

Thomey, T. (1955) 'Did Vampira Cast Evil Spell? Who's a Zombie? And Who's a Witch?' *Independent-Press-Telegram*, 6 February, A-17.

Notes

- 1 ...which means that trade journals and other industrial publications will not be a part of this study.
- 2 The first time the term appears in *Variety*, for one example, in is 1958, describing the 'weirdo wax' single 'Flip-Top Box (Dee! Dee!)' by Dickey Doo and the Don'ts.
- 3 Maila Nurmi's life story has been recounted many times. For sheer entertainment value - although not necessarily the greatest accuracy - I would recommend any of the interviews she gave, most vividly on video in Kevin Sean Michaels's *Vampira: the Movie* (Dir. Kevin Sean Michaels, 2007) and in print in *Fangoria Magazine's* 'The One - The Only Vampira'. David J. Skal provides the best academic perspective on the subject in *The Monster Show*, although it could use another round of fact-checking; for a glimpse of Vampira fandom, browse through John Skerchock's *Vampira Unauthorized*. The blogosphere has dozens of sites covering Vampira. For Vampira's Official website, visit her Facebook page (www.facebook.com/officialvampira); my favourite blog is *Fuck Yeah Vampira!* (fuckyeahvampira.tumblr.com) - with a name like that, it has got to be good.
- 4 Incidentally, everyone who writes about Vampira eventually gets around to mentioning her anatomy-defying waist measurement. I have now fulfilled my obligation.
- 5 Her show's title went through several permutations. The KABC one-night preview show went by the beatniky *Dig Me Later, Vampira*, while other names included *Lady of Horrors, The Vampira Show*, and, simply, *Vampira*.
- 6 Trivia fans will want to take note that the Mayor of Hollywood in 1955 was future TV sitcom *Golden Girl* Betty White.
- 7 Vampira was nominated for the 'Most Outstanding Female Personality' Emmy in 1954. She didn't win it.
- 8 Did Vampira turn her audience into Adorno's dupes, lapping up warmed-over junk as nourishing entertainment because of her crafty packaging - thus succeeding only to increase KABC's profit margin? This is a subject for more exploration.
- 9 Neither of which came to fruition, alas.
- 10 Sherman covered hard news stories as well, and was famous for reporting on Mickey Cohen, the illegal drug trafficking from Mexico to California (for which he won a Pulitzer Prize in 1960), and the crash that killed Carole Lombard ('Miss Lombard's body, badly burned and mangled, was identified by a wisp of unscorched blond hair', *Los Angeles Times* 19 January 1942. For details, see <http://www.pulitzer.org/awards/1960> for the former and <http://ladailymirror.com/2012/01/19/lombards-body-recovered-from-crash/> for the latter.
- 11 Interestingly, Copp turned towards children's entertainment after leaving his gossip column. Beginning in 1958, he and partner Ed Brown created a series of strange kids'

-
- music LPs, including odd songs like the spooky 'Portrait of a Monster'. Sample lyric: 'the man who lived inside this house/ Was a horrible man/ He was so horrible that the good wives of the town/ Warned their children never to go near him...'
- 12 For this one example, I am 'cheating' on my historical framing and extending one year beyond 1956. My excuse is that the society costuming trend seemed to lag slightly behind Vampira's reign on television, with most occurrences taking place between 1956 and 1958. This particular piece illustrates many characteristics of the trend, so I'm allowing it to stand for several articles, both before and after my bracketing.
 - 13 Her cop-slapping would occur thirty-four years in the future.
 - 14 Curiosity-seekers may wish to point their browsers to <http://www.gettyimages.ie/detail/news-photo/actress-zsa-zsa-gabor-dressed-as-vampira-attends-sonja-news-photo/103442487>, last accessed April 28, 2012.
 - 15 Mosby was most famous for a 1959 interview she conducted with an American dissident living in self-imposed exile in Moscow - Lee Harvey Oswald.
 - 16 Regrettably and inexplicably, KABC decided not to go with their first idea for Voluptua's telephone: 'Originally the ring was to be a moan. The station advertised to audition moaners (20 women showed up), but that inspiration was discarded.'