

Before It Was Ghoul: Vampira's Legacy in the Construction of Cult TV Sensibilities

Why do some of us pluck particular “cult” television shows from among homogenized fields of blandly “quality” programming and focus our critical skills on scorned texts from marginalized genres? Because we *like* them. More to the point, we often relish these works less for their inherent qualities (or *Quality*) than for the ways in which we like them. Those of us who gravitate towards cult artifacts assume an antiheroic, oppositional connoisseurship, committing ourselves to a quasi-evangelical mission of abjuring the popular and popularizing the abject. Although it's worth investigating what personality quirks lead certain critics to embrace cult/trash aesthetics – I'd cop to Adornian cynicism, Bourdieuvian social identification, aging hipsterism, and perversity myself – I'm more interested in the historical lineage of this perspective. Recently, I've become fixated on a champion of the cult sensibility whose work seems foundational and yet largely unsung: Vampira.

Long before *MST3K* mocked bombs, Elvira slinked and snarked her way through flops, or Joe Bob Briggs ranked movies on his vomit-meter, there was Vampira, television's original horror host. Vampira, a character that actress/showgirl/pin-up/painter Maila Nurmi Frankensteined from the body parts of burlesque, Charles Addams cartoons, and underground S&M fetish magazines, was TV's “glamour ghoul,” who introduced insomniac Angelenos to a collection of creaky genre midnight-movies during the 1950s (cognoscenti will nod in familiarity with her iconic performance as Bela Lugosi's zombified wife in Ed Wood's *Rosetta Stone* badfilm *Plan 9 From Outer Space*). Vampira also introduced cult sensibilities to LA's bleary-eyed viewers – and to the nation at large: her ironic, humorous celebration of “bad” films defined cultist oppositional aesthetics, established her as an arbiter of counter-canonical taste, and unleashed a gruesome menagerie of late-night horror hosts hoping to duplicate her success upon local-TV viewers across the US (including regional fan-favorites like Ghoulardi, Zacherley, and Morgus the Magnificent). *The Vampira Show* created a foundation for a mode of tv's “distinctive repetition,” repackaging theatrical films as fodder for ironic and provocative riffing; she also popularized cult appreciation before academics and critics would claim it as their own. Does our understanding of contemporary cultism change if we complement the historical heritage based on the critical observations of Sontag, Farber, and Mekas with a historical grounding in a popular, local tradition – beginning with the curation of the *original* Mistress of the Dark – born of the medium itself?

My research into Vampira suggests that there may be unexpected and intriguing contact points between mainstream and “alternative” taste: not only was Vampira popular in her local market, for instance, but the Vampira phenomenon was covered in national media as well (*Life*, *Newsweek*, *TV Guide*). Examination of Vampira also provides insight into the kinds of content that winds up getting codified as cult, and she becomes our historical touchstone for the close association of cine/telefantasy and cult appreciation. Further, Vampira's transgressive routines and grotesquely sexual persona – she made Southern California safe for S&M and necrophilia as well as monster movies – suggest darker undercurrents that lay beneath the veneer of

supposed '50s conservatism. On the other hand, a brief glimpse at one of her contemporary competitors – an even *less*-celebrated, more obscure KABC-LA late-night movie host whose show met with controversy and failure (and yes, that's a tease!) – may provide some clues as to both the limits of popular acceptance of overt sexuality and transgression (*and* grant us insight into which genres tend to be excluded from cultists' pantheons to boot). Additionally, a study of *The Vampira Show* provides a (missing) link between cult tv and cult movie audiences, demonstrating a need for interdisciplinary work among cult-curious academics. Finally, Vampira's example prompts us to look for other sites of cultist canon creation as well – in particular, the acquisition and scheduling practices of the lowly tv programmers who build the late-night blocks that keep both cultist fans and academics awake at night.