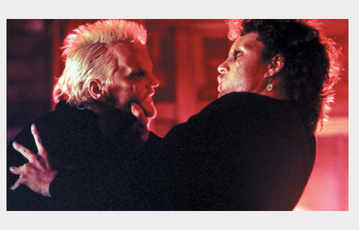
Jun 26

THE LOST BOYS: A SIREN CALL FOR OUTSIDERS

Retrospective

THE LOST BOYS (1987) MOVIE POSTER. SOURCE: STUDIO HOUSE DESIGNS

With the recent passing of film director Joel Schumacher, it’s timely to honor one of his finest moments: *The Lost Boys* (1987). A subversive comedy-horror hybrid aimed at an older, cooler audience than earlier films like *The Goonies* (1985) and an updated, 80’s refresh on the biker gang and bad boy tropes that have been so prevalent in films and popular culture beginning in the 1950s.



Looking back at the history of vampires in film, we often see older men portraying the role which made the teenage vampire gang depicted in this film a reboot of the vampire archetype. Schumacher broke the mold and made his vampires into brooding young adults, pushing the limits of comedic camp while maintaining a proper horror aesthetic. A fun note: also released in 1987 was the goofball vampire comedy *My Best Friend is a Vampire* and the supernatural western *Near Dark*, a cult rival in the vampire category to *The Lost Boys*.

The archetype of the vampire aims to corrupt their victim, an otherwise morally upright and heteronormative person, through the act of seduction. In the sexualized symbol of biting a victim’s neck and feeding off of their blood, the vampire represents a rebellion against societally tamed morals about sensuality and indulges in their desire with abandon. Beyond this, the vampire is an easy metaphor to apply to anyone who feels like an outsider whether it is based on fashion and musical preferences or sexual orientation. Just prior to *The Lost Boys’* release in July 1987, the depiction of vampires in *The Hunger* (1983) featured homoerotic overtones between the female characters Catherine Deneuve and Susan Sarandon who were in a love triangle with David’s Bowie’s vampire character. Even David Bowie’s presence in this iteration lends to the androgyny and dangerous sensuality of the undead, which brings us back to *The Lost Boys* and the notable homoerotic nuance to the characters: the ‘sensual’ (as Kiefer Sutherland put it) dynamic between characters David and Michael in multiple scenes (especially the bridge jump scene and the final fight scene) and the utter lack of sexual interest shown by the vampire family toward their female captive halfling, Star. In fact, *The Lost Boys* has become a popular title in queer film for not just for this subtext but also because director Joel Schumacher himself was a gay man, adding another layer of perspective to the portrayal of the vampire archetype and the worldview of the characters. The relationship between David and Michael is about seduction, bringing Michael into a different world and “turning him” into a member of the vampire gang-- another metaphor for the anxiety of being changed or “outed” into something less accepted by society.

> **“That whole scene where I catch him in the fog coming off the bridge… I mean, it’s a very sensual moment!”**
>
> — Kiefer Sutherland

The setting of the film is the fictitious town Santa Carla but we all know it is Santa Cruz in California, a South Bay beach town known in the 70s and 80s for its unfortunate run of serial killers making headlines; John Linley Frazier, Herbert Mullin and Edmund Kemper were among the top news-makers of the 70s and 80s for the murders in Santa Cruz. “Murder Capital” was a name assigned to Santa Carla in the film but was factual to the history of the real city of Santa Cruz. Nonetheless, director Schumacher believed this was the town he wanted to shoot *The Lost Boys* at, saying, “At the time, there was an enormous amount of transient kids moving through Santa Cruz. This is exactly where I would come if I was a teenage vampire."

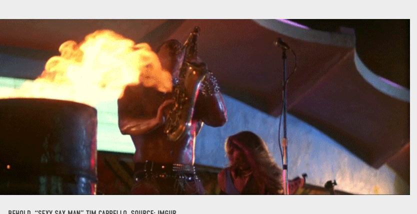
The film opens with images of the boardwalk in the summertime at night and later cuts to protagonist Michael and his family as they pass the “Welcome to Santa Carla” sign where Michael notices the back of the sign has been tagged with the line “Murder Capital of the World”. Cue Echo and the Bunnymen's cover of “People are Strange” by The Doors, foreshadowing the events to unfold and revealing Schumacher’s adoration of Jim Morrison (who actor Jason Patric strongly resembles). The later depiction of the vampire cave shows the Lizard King in a large poster hanging behind David, solidifying the director’s appreciation for the alternative music of his youth and adding more clues to the film’s subtext of homosexuality (N.B.: Morrison famously spoke about his own supernatural experience at age four when his soul was overtaken by that of a Native American man while Jim witnessed the man’s death). The extended montage of punks and transient kids in the town as well as the repeated shots of missing posters definitely hint that this story and its setting’s inhabitants are predominantly “other”, separate from mainstream values and in some cases, missing entirely from the mainstream media’s cultural dialogue. Also, more literally, these vampires have been killing a lot of people in Santa Carla so there’s a ton of missing kid posters.

The Emersons arrive in Santa Carla, “Murder Capital of the World”.

When Michael’s younger brother Sam enters the comic book shop and meets Edgar and Allan Frog (yes, named in reference to American writer Edgar Allan Poe), they attempt to initiate him into a world beyond the visible world: in this case, the vampires and occult activity in their town and the pursuit of this underworld by a brave few is a metaphor for the very real aspects of our world that mainstream media does not want to look at and the people that choose to pursue it become either the outsider or the hunter of the outsider.

> *“I’m a big Jim Morrison fan, so I asked the keyboard artist from The Doors for permission to re-record ‘People Are Strange’ with Echo And The Bunnymen. The theme [‘Cry Little Sister’] came to me as a sample demo. Gerard McMann sent a note saying he’d read the script and written this song for the film. It’s haunting, religious, sexy – perfect.” - Joel Schumacher*

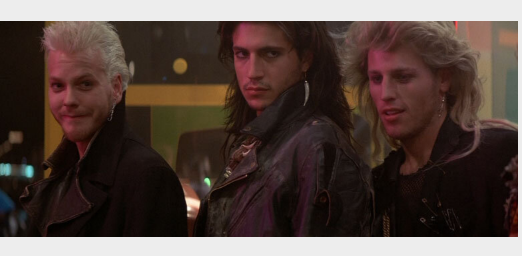
The music used in *The Lost Boys* has also become iconic, appealing to not only a mainstream audience but also to alternative music fans. Echo and the Bunnymen covering The Doors’ “People are Strange”, INXS appearing with the song “Good Times” and (from Rochester, New York!) Lou Gramm’s “Lost In The Shadows (Lost Boys)” contributed to the cool aesthetic of the film. Even with those big names on the soundtrack’s roster, they were eclipsed by two other tracks: Tina Turner's well-oiled saxophone player, the now notorious Tim Cappello performing “I Still Believe” is better known as “Sexy Sax Man”. He is certainly a fantasy fit for any hair metal video with wild hip gyrations that beguiled the audience in the scene just as feverishly as Elvis’ early audiences must have been, but this time with unabashed sexuality that seemed directly inspired by the gay club scene.



BEHOLD, “SEXY SAX MAN” TIM CAPPELLO. SOURCE: IMGUR

The theme song for this film will forever be regarded as a classic: Gerard McMahon’s (who used a pseudonym surname “McMann” for this release) song “Cry Little Sister”. The homoerotic connotations are clear in the lyrics and seem to describe the sense of being an outsider, pretending to “fit in” and the yearning to be outside of the bondage of imposed social norms.

> **Blue masquerade, strangers look on**
> **When will they learn this loneliness?**
> **Temptation heat beats like a drum**
> **Deep in your veins, I will not lie…**
> **… To little sister (Thou shall not fall)**
> **Come to your brother (Thou shall not die)**
> **Unchain me, sister (Thou shall not fear)**
> **Love is with your brother (Thou shall not kill)**
>
> — Excerpt from "Cry Little Sister"



On the other hand, there is the vampire gang led by the aforementioned David. They have order, seem to not “go without” as far as need and wants are concerned (sleep all day, drink blood, have fun). Albeit there is a moral compass shift in this group, one fact remains: there is an openness and honesty about the desires of this group which is not present in the former family of Lucy and her sons Sam and half-vampire Michael. The vampire family seems to be a stronger unit than the human family is depicted.

The term “The Lost Boys'' is from Peter Pan, a story about young boys who fall into Neverland and become essentially immortal children. Perhaps David and his gang of young adult vampires represents this childlike ideal of escape and adventure. *The Lost Boys* was, of course, notoriously pegged as a children’s movie à la *The Goonies* (Richard Donner) but made more “grown up” to appeal to a new audience. In poetic metaphor, the symbolism of blood in the storyline goes well beyond the vampiric trope. Again reflecting the cultural climate of the late 80s, many young people--let alone anyone in the gay community suffering from the impact of the AIDS epidemic and the loss of loved ones--had to reimagine what they considered to be their “family”. Some of us are lucky enough to have our biological family serve as a safe, structured unit, relying on everyone to act out their roles and look out for one another within the family system. For the vast majority of people, this is not the case and they are forced to find a new “logical family”. You’ll hear echoes of this in the various subcultures that have arisen since the 1970s with special note to the gay community and the punk and dark alternative community we later called “goth” who formed family units with like-minded people for safety and support amidst the tides of change and upheaval being experienced in the world. This was no different in the late 80s when *The Lost Boys* was conceived and produced.

> *“At the time I was fascinated by English gypsy culture,” Schumacher says. “Their style had a sense of anarchy and rebellion. Gypsies are outsiders, and this movie is, in a way, about the fear we have of the Other – those who live outside of the mainstream.” - Joel Schumacher*

The fashion of *The Lost Boys* has also gained attention because the vampire gang so clearly represented the alternative fashion of the “outsider” of the later 1980s: teased and mulleted hair, leather, fishnet, military-inspired jackets with excess fringe and patches made the gang look like they could be at any bar along the Sunset Strip in the height of its hair metal days. David’s colder, darker aesthetic reflected the mood of uncertainty and focus on geopolitical conflicts centering around the Soviet Union. “Oh, they're just young. We were that age, too, once. But they dress better.” says Lucy when she meets the vampire biker gang.

> *“It has always been fashionable to copy certain elements of dress that have public timeliness, such as military motifs in war time or foreign motifs while public attention is focused on the foreigners in question.” - Anne Hollander from Seeing Through Clothes, 1978*

David is seen wearing an earring throughout the film and Michael appears with one (noticed by his younger brother, Sam) after beginning his transformation into a vampire. Despite the dirt and blood covered skin and fabrics, the vampires of *The Lost Boys* are glamorous, exuding a style that seems to be a cross between street punk and glam. Perhaps this is yet another nod to Jim Morrison in the leather and “sensitive troublemaker” persona affected by lead vampire David. Pepper in the skeletal motorbikes as the transportation of choice for the vamp gang and you have another nod to mid-century biker films and the classic bad boy trope.

> *“Costume designer Susan Becker worked directly with the actors to come up with their looks, giving each of the four main vampires a budget and sending them to Melrose Avenue to pick out their outfits…Of all the vamps, David most closely aligned with the ‘English gypsy’ aesthetic that Schumacher — a former costume designer himself — had envisioned, inspired by natty 80s band Arcadia and German fashion magazines.” - The Dedicated Follower of Fashion*

David’s hair is a cross between a darker Billy Idol and a nod to Ziggy Stardust era Bowie. The shock of white blonde keeps it on point for the 80s but deviates just enough from being seen as “hair metal” hair. Kiefer Sutherland has said in interviews

that he initially dyed his hair white at the request of Schumacher but looked more like a pro wrestler (Ric Flair?) than an undead teen vampire, so he cut it into the iconic Billy Idol mullet and voilà: instant hair icon status.

The foam and silicone prosthetics created for this film by special effects makeup artists Ve Neill and Greg Cannom have become iconic, too: the vampire as monster maintains the actor's facial features while exaggerating the menacing look of the carnivorous creature of the night. You might recognize this template along with the fiery eye contacts (which was an innovation for its time) and Exacto-shaped nails worn by the undead gang in other vampires like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*--of which, the character "Spike" is undoubtedly an update to the character David in *The Lost Boys*. The fangs were also modernized, moving to the incisor and cuspid instead of the traditional depiction of fangs replacing the human cuspid. Something else we can all thank makeup artist Greg Cannom for is the use of gold glitter in the vampire blood, especially visible during the getaway scene when Sam and the Frog brothers kill vampire Marko and make their escape from the vampire lair (yeah, there's a *Twilight* reference in there).

Regardless of how you remember this film, like it or not, it has become a canon in the realm of queer cinema, teen rebellion, alternative subculture and had perhaps the most fun, tongue-in-cheek take on some of the darkest aspects of life at that time. Really, though, you'll always remember this film for being a fantastic time capsule of the late 80s with the dark alternative fashion, the epic hair, the boardwalk, Sexy Sax Man and the question of "who you'd rather": Michael or David? Because it's perfectly in tune with the sinister vibe of the film and the sensuality pulsating beneath the film's narrative, you probably knew I had to end with "Cry Little Sister"... You're welcome.

All images from Warner Bros. Entertainment unless otherwise noted.

Joel Schumacher, Kiefer Sutherland, Jason Patric, Vampires, 1987, Berlin, Perestroika, Horror, Camp, Teen Movie, Queer Culture, Film, Cold War, Ve Neill, Greg Cannom, Special Effects Makeup, bikers, Queer Film, Corey Haim, Corey Feldman, Santa Cruz, Serial Killer, Echo and the Bunnymen, The Doors, Cry Little Sister, INXS, 1980s, Fashion, punk fashion, New Romantic, Gypsy, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, Berlin Wall, Soviet Union, Michael, The Lost Boys

Liz Rhodes

Liz Rhodes is based in Los Angeles and is the Editor for Lethal Amounts and the Associate Editor of Auxiliary Magazine where she also serves as a Creative Director to produce beauty and fashion editorials. Aside from writing about artists and alternative culture, she DJs under the moniker Nuit Noir and is an astrology junkie.

Website

CONTACT US

LOCATION:

1226 West 7th st Los Angeles CA 90017 USA

SUBSCRIBE

COMPLETE THE FORM BELOW TO RECEIVE THE LATEST UPDATES FROM LETHAL AMOUNTS

Email Address

SIGN UP