Tony Scott: The Hunger (US, 1983)

Script: James Costigan, Ivan Smith, et al. Miriam: Catherine Deneuve
Camera: Stephen Goldblatt John: David Bowie
Music: Denny Jaeger, Michael Rubini Sarah Roberts: Susan Sarandon
Studio: MGM Tom: Cliff De Young

With a heavy Goth rhythm (“Bela Lugosi’s Dead”), the film takes us first to a New York night club to introduce us to a modern vampire couple—Miriam (Catherine Deneuve) and John (David Bowie). The night ends with an innocent ménager à quatre that turns into a bloodbath when John and Miriam first slaughter and then suck their unsuspecting “partners”—two young “seekers of strong sensations.” Through flashbacks accompanying a love scene between the two, the film soon makes it clear that the vampires’ love affair is by no means a fleeting one: their relationship goes back to, at least, the 18th century. The centuries that have elapsed after their first love vow (they promise one another to remain together “forever and ever”) have changed only their attire, but not their appearance and even less—their feelings.

Their love’s blissful eternity is most unexpectedly interrupted the next morning when John discovers various signs of aging on his body. As his physical decrepitude begins to increase at an incredible rate, the panic-stricken John decides to visit scientist Sarah Roberts (Susan Sarandon). She has recently published a book on the connection between sleep and longevity and is currently conducting experiments on reversing the process of aging.

1. The spectacular make-up is the chief device for tracing John’s rapid aging during his visit to the clinic. In what other way(s) does the film dramatize this process?

2. How does Miriam react to John’s tragedy? What is her failure vis-à-vis him?

3. After realizing the irreversibility of the aging process, John asks Miriam for one final “favor.” What is it? Why is Miriam unable to do him this favor? What is it that John “does not understand”? What does this lack of understanding suggest about the relationship between the two?

4. The wooden box in which John is laid is placed amidst similar wooden boxes. Who are their inhabitants? What does Miriam ask of John’s “neighbors”? Why?

5. What is the nature of Sarah’s disease? What is ironic about her affliction? How does Miriam react to Sarah’s vehement inquiries? Is she completely honest with Sarah?

6. All important motifs in the film (the hunger, the love between John and Mariam, aging, etc.) have their own musical “label.” The musical theme assigned to Miriam and Sarah’s relationship is the duet from the first act of Delibes’ opera Lakmé. The duet is an invitation to mirthful pleasures exchanged between Lakmé, an Indian priestess, and her servant, Mallika. In what other ways is the motif of mistress-servant (master-slave) realized in the film?

7. Scott chooses not to show us Sarah’s first blood meal (we are watching Miriam and her reactions). At one point, the film cuts to a blood-drinking scene, but this is not the scene we expect to see (although the setting is the same—Miriam’s bedroom on the second floor of her house). Who are the participants of this scene? What is Scott trying to suggest with this unexpected cut?

8. How are we to understand Sarah’s suicide? What are her motives?
9. How are we to understand Miriam’s perdition? Is she punished by her lovers? If so, what for? Is such a resolution justified by the rest of the narrative?

10. How should we understand the film’s ending? Why is Sarah alive? Who are the people with her? What have they been doing? What can we assume about Sarah’s new life?

11. On the most explicit level, the film’s title refers to the vampire’s hunger for blood. Is this the only viable reading of the title? What other “hunger(s)” could Scott have in mind?