

The Joy of Tar

Written by

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by **Vesperae**

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There is a very brief scene in 1972's [Conquest of the Planet of the Apes](#), the fourth installment of the original five feature film franchise, where an unidentified woman is shown seated at a table in an outdoor plaza talking to a companion while smoking a cigarette. Set in the distant future on the cusp of the ape uprising and revolution, and intended to show one little example of how corrupt and decadent humanity had become, she complains in reference to her presumably "harm eliminated" futuristic cigarettes:

"Funny, now that I know these things won't kill me, I don't enjoy them."

The line was almost certainly intended as a joke and a comment on the growing prevalence of anti-smoking public health campaigns and anti-smoking public service announcements at the time. I must have been about 9 or 10 when I saw this movie on TV for the first and only time, and it's one of those little moments that made a tremendous impression on me and that has stuck with me all my life, because it was perhaps the first time that I was ever confronted with the notion of the *Sublime* appeal of smoking. Something clicked in my young mind, and suddenly the attraction to smoking began to make sense in a way that had never occurred to me before. The realization frightened me, confused me...and turned me on.

Four decades after that distant future imaged in the early 1970s, cigarette advertising has been virtually eliminated everywhere in the U.S., commercially produced cigarettes have been reduced to a tiny fraction of their original impact and pleasure, and cigarette smokers have become deeply shamed and closeted pariahs. And while the apes don't yet seem to be showing signs of overthrowing humanity, we do now have something very close to the concept of "harm eliminated" cigarettes, or at least drastically "harm reduced" cigarette analogues. We have [electronic cigarettes \(eCigs\)](#).

eCigs are a response to ever increasing anti-smoking pressure in two ways – first, they provide "smokers" with simulated sensations of smoking and a hit of nicotine when they are confined to an environment where actual smoking is either undesirable or is not allowed, and second, they are intended to eliminate exposure to a vast range of toxic and carcinogenic combustion products present in actual cigarette smoke, thereby reducing harm to both the "smoker" and to those in the "smoker's" immediate airspace. Instead of traditional smoke, eCigs produce a heated vapor of nicotine, flavor, and "mouth feel" chemicals suspended in propylene glycol, designed to simulate cigarette smoke. When exposed to a heating/atomizing element, propylene glycol approximates the appearance of cigarette smoke, although it quickly dissipates and becomes invisible once exhaled.

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Some eCigs are designed to look like actual cigarettes, some are designed to look like abstracted cigarettes in terms of unusual cylinder colors and LED tips that glow in colors other than red or orange (which would approximate the appearance of a burning cigarette), and some are even designed to be disguised as other objects, such as pens or screwdrivers! These "James Bond" variations strike me as being especially sad comments on our rabidly anti-smoking culture, in the sense of the lengths that some "smokers" are willing to go to closet themselves.

And it shouldn't surprise anyone that eCigs have not escaped the scrutiny of public health groups the world over, including the U.S. Food & Drug Administration, many of whom are seeking to declare eCigs "drug delivery devices" and regulate them out of existence. Even a drastically "harm reduced" cigarette analogue is apparently not to be tolerated in this rabidly anti-smoking climate...

I happened to catch [Katherine Heigl's appearance on David Letterman several months ago, during which she demonstrated an eCig](#) that she was using at the time as an intermediate step in her attempts to quit smoking (note that this clip was posted to YouTube by an eCig manufacturer), and I also recently saw a TV ad for eCigs on cable for the first time. I have to admit that both the Katherine Heigl clip, as well as the TV spot, during which several of the female models French inhaled big puffs of vaporized propylene glycol, did absolutely get my full attention, although it was really only because it's so incredibly rare and borderline shocking to see anyone "smoking" on TV anymore.

While they will almost certainly never push my personal SF buttons, my initial reaction to these clips got me thinking that eCigs could at least quite possibly provide a really nice workaround for many with an SF who find themselves in difficult anti-smoking situations, and especially, in committed relationships with non-smokers, or with former smokers. Some eCig manufacturers even produce vapor solutions with no nicotine at all, so for those who are able to engage in a certain level of suspension of disbelief, and for a willing partner, a more realistic looking eCig combined with a non-nicotine vapor solution might just be the perfect compromise for an otherwise completely unsatisfying SF relationship.

And interestingly enough, at least one SF video producer has recently started offering content featuring very attractive models using eCigs. Over the years, many in the SFC have told me that they believe that they are *only* attracted to the superficial visual aspects of smoking, and aren't in any way attracted to the *Darker* realities of smoking as part of the equation, and the response to eCigs SF content should put this belief to the test. My hunch is that this type of content won't be popular, because my suspicion has always been that the vast and overwhelming majority of us have SF desires that *are* fueled by awareness of the *Darker* dimensions of smoking, albeit to varying degrees of conscious awareness and acceptance.

eCigs first started showing up via guerrilla (no pun intended) internet advertising on YouTube and elsewhere a couple of years ago. The Katherine Heigl clip is a great recent example, and

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the Wikipedia entry linked above was almost certainly largely written by eCig manufacturers and is another example of virtually no cost net-savvy marketing. I definitely remember the first time I saw a demo clip on YouTube, and also the strength of my initial negative reaction. Fake smokeless cigarettes? No tingle there. At least not for *my* particular Fetish appetites. And the reason that I had, and continue to have, this reaction will be immediately obvious to anyone who consciously entertains the *Dark*
er

aspects of their SF, as I do, and as our hypothetical futuristic film smoker states above. If you've ever visited

[my forum](#)

, then you've read my little reductive manifesto on smoking, featured in the main index header and at the top of every message screen:

Danger is Sexy. Risk is Exciting. Being Bad feels Good.

All of which is entirely dependent on Tar. Oh yes...Tar. That's the stuff, Baby. Sticky, brown, stinky, toxic, nasty, horrible, gross, teeth staining, cilia paralyzing, alveoli bursting, airway coating, metaplasia inducing, lung blackening, big bad spooky boogie-boogie, hidden time bomb ticking away inside your chest Tar. The wonderful awful stuff that makes the full psychological Joy of smoking possible.

The wonder of Fire, deliberately applied, takes us back to our most primitive ritualistic memories, and transforms tobacco and paper into Tar. To consume the cigarette as Tar as it consumes us is to entertain an intensely private ritual of deeply corrupted breathing and an unholy communion of forbidden sensuality. To experience the residue of Tar all around us in the the air and in our environment and in ourselves is to be completely immersed and committed to Taboo. To embrace the corruption of Tar is to laugh into the Abyss with the fullness of Life.

But eCigs cannot offer this, at least not in any way even remotely like the experience of actually smoking a *real* cigarette can. Inhaling warm propylene glycol vapor? Boring. But inhaling *Tar*? Now that takes commitment and ego and force of will. And is infinitely more interesting and exciting.

To me, it's like the difference between having sex with a partner, and using a surrogate sex toy. Like many with a DS SF, it's easy for me to anthropomorphize cigarettes as Dark Lovers who penetrate me and thrill me to my depths (I'm obviously dealing in the realm of Personal SF Mythology and layers of symbolism here) and nothing will ever get me going me like the Danger and Risk of the *real* thing, in the same way that the emotional Danger and Risk of having sex with another is always a greater personal investment and subsequent return of gratification than a sex toy analogue can ever provide. To me, cigarettes meant to burn and corrupt me with Tar are like the caresses of an irresistible woman who really turns me on, and eCigs strike me as the comparative equivalent of a rather disappointing vibrator.

One of my favorite metaphors for both the experience of becoming a cigarette smoker and for the experience of cigarette smoking itself is the ancient cross-cultural archetype and myth of

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The Vampire. Vampires are evil, but seductive, like smoking. Vampires must be invited in by their victims, just as we must make the decision to choose to condition our lungs and bodies to become accustomed to smoking. Vampires must first be human before becoming vampires, and once transformed, can never go back, just as a smoker must first be a non-smoker, and is forever changed/tainted by becoming a smoker once she/he has started smoking. Vampires endlessly crave and destroy, just as smokers endlessly crave and destroy. And, of course, cigarettes are like little vampires that feed on smokers...just as smokers feed on their cigarettes like vampires.

And one of my favorite recent takes on The Vampire Mythos is the wonderful [True Blood](#), currently in production for it's fourth season on HBO, which will air this Summer. The central premise of the show is that the invention of synthetic blood (the show is titled for the brand name under which it is sold) has made it possible for vampires to "come out of the coffin" the world over and join mainstream society, since they no longer need to indulge their deadly antisocial behavior of drinking from humans in secret to survive. The show takes place following the "Great Revelation," when the audience gets to learn along with the rest of the humans on the show that the world is full of not just a vast and ancient Vampire Society, but of all sorts of other supernaturals as well, and that while a vampire can live on

True Blood

, drinking it pales in comparison to the

real

thing, and very few vampires can bear to live on it exclusively.

eCigs strike me as being exactly analogous to *True Blood*. As a "vampire" long accustomed to the sweet seductive satisfaction of deadly antisocial behavior, and as a long time lover of other "vampires" who are similarly enthusiastically corrupted, only the

real

thing – cigarettes that we

know

can kill us – will do.

There simply is no substitute for the Joy of Tar. [Email Vesperae](#)

Vesperae's discussion and DS multimedia forum: [The Sublime Desire of Cigarette Smoking](#)