

Shadow of the Vampire: *Dracula* in (Mis)translation

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Introduction

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is one of the most adapted novels in English literature, translated repeatedly into other media, whether stage, film or television. The figure of Dracula has become part of global popular culture, a commercially exploitable brand name associated with a diverse range of products. This paper examines the extent to which *Dracula* has been revised and reconfigured in translation while retaining the elements that hold its enduring fascination and relevance. David J. Skal, a leading *Dracula* scholar, characterises Stoker's novel as 'a lightning rod for prevailing social anxieties'.¹ I will argue that successful adaptations of *Dracula* highlight and modify aspects of the book in accordance with the preoccupations and needs of their time, whether social, cultural or historical.

The concept of the vampire was enshrined in folklore and literature long before the publication of *Dracula*. Fictional vampires appear in Gottfried August Burger's ballad *Lenore* (1773) and Robert Southey's poem *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), perhaps the first significant and influential account of the vampire in English. John Polidori's novel *The Vampyre* (1819) served as a blueprint for subsequent vampire sagas, with its nobleman who feasts on the blood of young women, and was a big commercial success. James Malcolm Rymer's *Varney the Vampyre: or, The Feast of Blood* (1847, also the year of Bram Stoker's birth) features an Eastern European nobleman who arrives in England by ship during a storm, elements that recur in *Dracula*. J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871), the story of a female vampire, is perhaps the most distinguished of these pre-*Dracula* texts in terms of literary achievement.

For those unfamiliar with *Dracula*, the plot can be summarised as follows. Count Dracula, an East European nobleman and vampire, travels from his native Transylvania to England, where he claims a number of victims. Dracula is opposed, pursued and eventually destroyed by a small group that includes estate agent Jonathan Harker, his schoolteacher fiancée Mina Murray, Doctor Jack Seward, aristocrat Arthur Holmwood, Texan adventurer Quincey P. Morris and Professor Van Helsing. While time does not allow for a detailed discussion of *Dracula* as a literary text, I would argue that Stoker's book picked up on the undercurrents of vampire mythology – including cannibalism, blasphemy, sexuality, xenophobia, identity and mortality – and crystallised them in a highly concentrated form. To take the example of cannibalism, devouring the flesh and blood of a victim is supposed to confer their strength and power, which has clear resonance in the book, where Dracula is revived and rejuvenated by the drinking of fresh blood. Focussing on three film adaptations, or translations, of *Dracula*, I explore the ways in which these archetypal motifs lend themselves to radical reinterpretations of Stoker's text.

My approach to these films employs theories of Reception Studies, a branch of Film that relates to contextualisation. It can be argued that an

¹ D. Skal, *Hollywood Gothic*, (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), p.142.

understanding of context generates a level of textual appreciation that is not achievable by any other means. The significance or meaning of any text is often shaped by external factors rather than the intrinsic qualities of the text itself. According to Barbara Klinger, Reception Studies

examine a network of relationships between a film or filmic element (such as a star), adjacent intertextual fields such as censorship, exhibition practices, star publicity and reviews, and the dominant or alternative ideologies of society at a particular time.²

Put simply, no text exists in a vacuum and there will always be an element of interaction with other fields. In addressing the synchronic or contemporary approach to Reception Studies, Klinger identifies three main subdivisions: cinematic practices, intertextual zones - which relate to other businesses and industries and other media and arts - and social and historical contexts'.³ It is with the third of these categories, social and historical contexts, which I am mainly concerned here.

Nosferatu

The first adaptation of *Dracula* I will discuss is the German film *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horrors*, produced by Prana-Film, directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau and released in 1922. The word 'nosferatu' is usually translated as living dead or 'undead', though its origins are unclear. Scriptwriter Henrik Galeen retained the essence – or rather *an* essence - of Stoker's story but changed all the character names. Count Dracula became Graf (Count) Orlok, Jonathan Harker became Hutter, Van Helsing became Bulwer and so forth. In addition to germanising the characters for local audiences, this was probably an attempt to avoid legal problems, as the film's producers had not obtained the rights to Stoker's novel, still under copyright at the time.

Nosferatu evokes a strong sense of a supernatural force intruding into the natural world. Much of the film's power derives from the physical appearance of Orlok and the performance of actor Max Schreck. Schreck can be translated as 'terror' but this was the actor's real name and not a pseudonym created for the role. The Dracula of Stoker's novel is a gaunt old man with white hair and a big moustache. While Dracula becomes progressively younger with regular infusions of blood, he retains his hairy palms, pointed teeth and bad breath. Stoker's Dracula is not the romantic, charismatic, even seductive figure of many later adaptations. In *Nosferatu*, the vampire's unappealing physical characteristics are accentuated and exaggerated to an extreme degree. Orlok has a gaunt face, bald head, pointed ears, prominent nose, large eyebrows and pointed incisors. Schreck's vampire has been described variously as 'a skinned bat' and 'human vermin'.

² B. Klinger, 'Film History Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies', *Screen*, vol. 30, no. 2, (Summer 1997), pp.107-128, (p.108).

³ *Ibid.*, p.113.



Figure 1 *Nosferatu - Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922); production company Prana-Film; producers Enrico Dieckmann, Albin Grau; director F.W. Murnau

Despite the mid-nineteenth century setting, in 1838 Wisborg, I would suggest that *Nosferatu* was both intended and received as a veiled commentary on recent historical events. Producer Albin Grau, who also designed *Nosferatu* and was probably most responsible for Orlok's appearance, drew a direct parallel between World War I and vampirism, describing the conflict as 'a cosmic vampire, drinking the blood of millions'.⁴ This could have been genuine conviction on Grau's part or just a shrewd promotional tactic in selling the film. Whatever the case, the connection was made explicit. During the war, many soldiers had suffered and survived terrible physical injuries, thanks to advances in both weaponry and medicine. Orlok's haunting appearance had uncomfortable real-life parallels with the disfigured veterans trying to rebuild their lives in post-war society, both in Germany and elsewhere. The Count can be seen as embodying the misunderstood outsider, the 'other', unjustly feared and shunned for his physical appearance and suspected of malevolent intent. Orlok has also been interpreted as a grotesque

⁴ Quoted in D. Skal, *The Monster Show*, (New York: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.50.

anti-Semitic caricature, reflecting a longstanding hostility towards Jewish communities throughout Europe that would, of course, have terrible consequences in Germany a short time later. Whatever the intentions of the film-makers, it seems reasonable to speculate that some audiences would have regarded the vampire in this fashion.

Count Orlok is also associated with the plague, accompanied by scores of rats as he invades the town of Wisborg. In 1918 and 1919, the Spanish flu pandemic raged throughout the entire world, claiming millions of victims. According to some accounts, the pandemic killed more people than the recent conflict. I would suggest that the cadaverous Orlok is, above all, a figure of pestilence and death, familiar preoccupations for a post-war society threatened further by political and economic instability. While Dracula has the power to create, or 'breed', new vampires, Orlok is a destroyer of individual lives, families, communities and societies. Contemporary German critics saw *Nosferatu* as a potent metaphor for human malaise and post-war German angst.

Blacula

The American film *Blacula*, released in 1972, was produced by AIP (American International Pictures) and directed by William Crain, an African-American television veteran. The film was made in the context of the 'blaxploitation' boom - a series of low budget films exploiting the growing demand for black-themed cinema - against a backdrop of civil rights campaigning and civil unrest, and foregrounds both racial difference and racism. *Blacula* proposes that, many years before Jonathan Harker arrived at Castle Dracula, the Count had another visitor, the African Prince Mamuwalde. Travelling through Europe to campaign against the slave trade, Mamuwalde seeks Dracula's support and soon regrets his naivety.

Though not intended as a straight adaptation of *Dracula*, *Blacula* offers an interesting, if brief depiction of the Count: middle-aged, with long grey hair and a beard, well-spoken and wealthy. He's also imperialistic, racist, lascivious, sadistic and murderous. I would argue that this Dracula is, in the parlance of the film's era, 'The Man', the powerful white male oppressor, exploiter and abuser of ethnic minorities, biting and imprisoning the defiant Mamuwalde in a sealed coffin.

Count Dracula transforms Mamuwalde into his unwilling 'heir', *Blacula*, who is then transposed to contemporary Los Angeles. The depiction of 1970s America suggests that some of Mamuwalde's dreams of freedom have been realised. African Americans have progressed from slavery to being part of the professional classes. One of the main characters is a respected and outspoken police doctor, yet he articulates the view that the colour bar still persists, with black people treated as second class citizens. The sense of racial conflict is carried over into the supernatural realm - a black vampire bites a white morgue attendant, the black doctor stakes a white vampire - yet the film is less simplistic than these instances would imply. When a white cop suggests that the militant Black Panther movement could be involved with the series of mysterious murders committed by *Blacula* and his undead victims, he is greeted with ridicule. The real conflict is between modern America - for all its racial and social tensions - and the figure of *Blacula*, the cursed, predatory cadaver of a once great man.

Prince Mamuwalde personifies Black pride and progress, pursuing his aims with intelligence and plain speaking. As *Blacula* he is lost and alone, out of time and out of place, fixated on a woman he believes to be the reincarnation of his

murdered wife. When struck by bloodlust, he acquires extra facial hair, notably eyebrows and sideburns, emphasising the bestial, animalistic nature that has possessed and contaminated him. On another level of appearance, his dark suit and cape jar with contemporary fashions. This sense of distance is underlined by the casting of William Marshall, a classically trained theatre actor with a powerful deep voice and precise enunciation, whose performance style clashes deliberately with the more naturalistic playing of the other black actors. As one character remarks, 'He is a strange dude.' Blacula attacks the very people he lost his life and soul trying to help, dismissing them with contempt, 'They mean nothing to me'. The film's trailer refers to Blacula as 'Dracula's soul brother' and as such he becomes the thing he once despised, a figurative and literal bloodsucker driven only by appetite, preying on the weak and vulnerable, spreading his curse to a new generation. Unlike Dracula, he seeks redemption of a kind, destroying himself by walking into the sunlight.

Bram Stoker's Dracula

Bram Stoker's Dracula, released in 1992, was a big budget adaptation – costing around US\$40 million⁵ - produced by Columbia, a major Hollywood studio, and directed by Francis Coppola, a major or once-major film-maker. The film was touted as the first faithful adaptation of Stoker's book, which is not the case, and marketed as a Gothic love story rather than a 'straight' horror movie. *Bram Stoker's Dracula* is mainly of interest for the way it remodels the book's preoccupation with 'deviant' sexuality and tainted blood into a blatant AIDS metaphor, thereby stressing its modern relevance, while simultaneously proclaiming both its literary and cinematic heritage.

James V. Hart's script takes major liberties with Stoker's book, introducing a back story centred on the historical figure of Wallachian prince Vlad the Impaler, also known as Son of the Dragon, or Dracula, who lent his name and little else to the novel. At the same time, Hart attempts to remain faithful to the epistolary structure of the text, notably the diary entries of Jonathan Harker, Mina Murray and Doctor Seward. The film is highly self-referential, being set in 1897, the year of the book's publication. As Count Dracula, Gary Oldman seems to model his accent on Bela Lugosi, probably the actor most associated with the role thanks to his appearance in the 1931 film version. The menacing shadows evoke *Nosferatu*, while a kinematograph exhibit acknowledges the era of silent cinema in which the 1922 film was produced.

Bram Stoker's Dracula is also notable for its self-conscious symbolism. Vlad the Impaler's red armour resembles exposed muscle tissue – conveying both the strength and frailty of the human body - and the deluge of blood threatens to overwhelm the film. We are presented with a bleeding cross, a giant spray of blood over a victim's deathbed and a female vampire vomiting blood on Van Helsing's crucifix. This imagery ties in with the overt emphasis on sexuality and repression, typified by the explicit illustrations in a copy of *The Arabian Nights*, a trio of topless female vampires who drain Keanu Reeves' Jonathan Harker and the scene where Dracula in werewolf form violates a semi-naked victim. The theme of tainted blood becomes, perhaps inevitably, a reference to the AIDS epidemic identified in America just a few years before the film was made. Dracula's initial possessiveness of Jonathan Harker suggests a gay subtext, most notably in the

⁵ Source: Internet movie database, <<http://uk.imdb.com/title/tt0103874/business>>.

scene where he takes a razor and shaves Harker with loving care, licking the latter's blood off the blade. Following Stoker's lead, or at least his narrative structure, the film then attempts to dissipate these undercurrents by shifting Dracula's interest to female victims. Van Helsing lectures on syphilis and venereal disease, accompanied by shots of red blood cells. There is, of course, a case for arguing that when a subtext becomes a surface text, it loses much of its effectiveness. Nevertheless, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* clearly struck a chord with audiences, grossing around \$200 million in cinemas worldwide.⁶

Conclusion

Of the films discussed, only *Nosferatu* is regarded as artistically significant, acquiring classic status over the years. I would argue that all three films are of considerable interest for addressing concerns of their era through the lightning rod that is *Dracula*. Whatever their limitations as cinema, these adaptations of *Dracula* suggest Stoker's novel may be translated between media with varying fidelity to the original text while keeping in place the subtexts - in whatever combination - that have attracted successive generations.

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⁶ Ibid.