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3-8-2011

Vampires

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Recommended Citation

DiPaolo, Marc, "Vampires" (2011). *Faculty Books & Book Chapters*. 9.
https://dc.swosu.edu/cas_ll_books/9

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Vampires

In their classic form, vampires are immortal, nonhuman beings who sustain themselves by drinking human blood. Sometimes referred to as *nosferatu* or *wurdalak*, vampires are most often portrayed as "undead" individuals who have come back to life after death. These undead are occasionally mindless, zombielike figures who feel an instinctive desire to feed upon those they loved in life. More evolved vampires retain much of the personality that they had when they were alive, but they have lost their connection to humanity because of their insatiable thirst for blood. These "master" vampires keep their existence secret by living apart from humankind, either in abandoned locations or as members of an underground society. At times, they masquerade as humans in order to blend in with the civilized world, although some are better at disguising their out-of-date manners and clothing than others. As nocturnal hunters, most vampires are reluctant to attack more than one human at a time and seek prey that is vulnerable and alone. More often than not, they kill those they attack. However, on certain occasions they are so fascinated by their prey that they decide to initiate the victim into the cult of vampirism by forcing him or her to drink vampire blood. Interestingly enough, vampires become vulnerable when they fall in love with their prey, and the attachment often leads to their destruction.

A popular subject of low-budget and independent films, vampires have inspired lyric, erotic, and violent movies. These films vary wildly in quality, from the inspired to the unwatchable, and it is nearly impossible to predict their artistic merit based on their lurid titles and poster art. Film connoisseurs generally consider the vampire to be emblematic of escapist entertainment at its most extreme, since the creatures' highly supernatural nature taxes to the limit viewer's ability to suspend disbelief. However, vampire films often force viewers to confront their darkest impulses, as well as some of the greatest evils of society. In these cases, the films may be the opposite of escapist—a foray into social and psychological

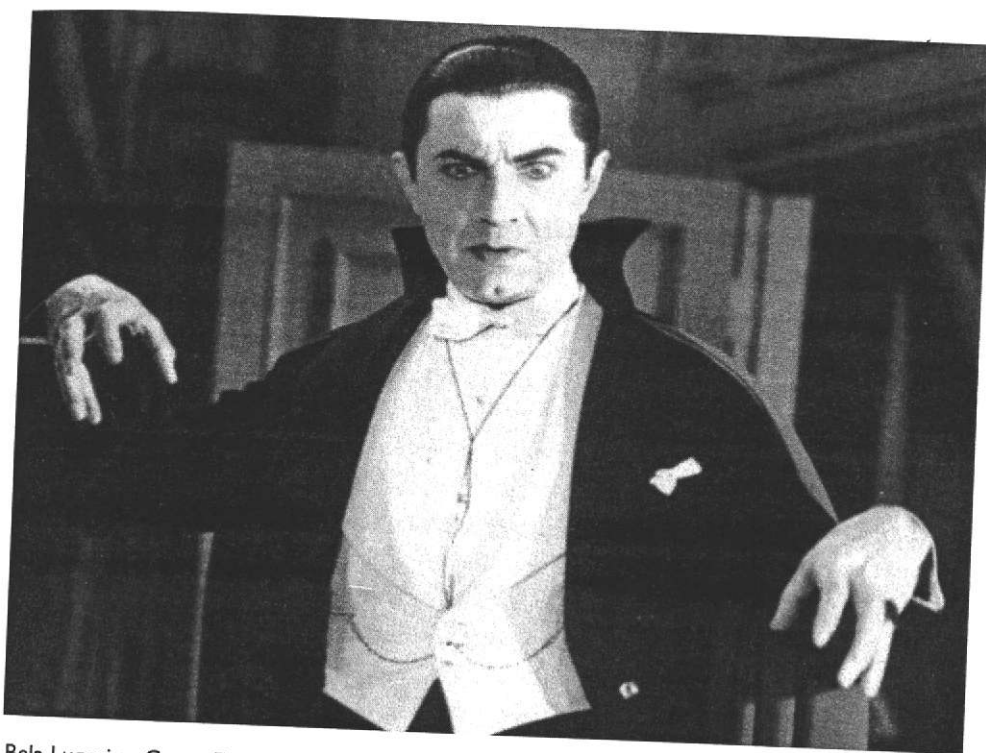
territories many would rather leave unexplored. Vampires are symbols of sin, sex, and death and the territory in which all three meet. As such, their social and religious significance is vast and often underestimated.

There are many different species of vampires and of vampire films, but they tend to cluster around five popular types. The “sensual” film ranges from the romantic (*Dracula* [1979]) to the pornographic (*Vampyres* [1974]), while the “poetic”—almost art house—meditations focus on death, rape, homosexuality, sexually transmitted disease, addiction, and even ethnic cleansing; they include such films as F. W. Murnau’s silent film *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (*Nosferatu the Vampire*, 1922) and Werner Herzog’s remake *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht* (*Nosferatu the Vampyre*, 1979), *Lemora: A Child’s Tale of the Supernatural* (1973), *Cronos* (*Chronos*, 1993), *Nadja* (1994), *The Addiction* (1995), and Joe Ahearne’s *Ultraviolet* (1998). There are a number of “campy romps” or spoofs of the genre’s overfamiliar conventions, including *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948), *Love at First Bite* (1979), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992); there are also a number of “melodramas” modeled after medieval morality plays and the British gothic tradition, including the films of Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee, *Salem’s Lot* (2004) and the “classic” Universal Studio monster films. Last, the “adventure” film is characterized by frequent use of special effects and liberal doses of martial arts choreography, as in *Underworld* (2003), *Van Helsing* (2004), and Kurt Wimmer’s *Ultraviolet* (2006).

A recent addition to the vampire genre is the vampire “war film,” an extension of the vampire adventure film that has the urgency and brutality of war movies. It often involves a small town or a fortified building that is under siege by an enemy force of far superior strength and numbers. In such films, the human defenders are clearly the heroes and the attacking vampire army the villains, making vampire war movies morally unambiguous. Although this formula is more common in zombie films, westerns, and science fiction blockbusters inspired by *Aliens* (1986), it is featured in such notable vampire films as *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), *30 Days of Night* (2007), and *I Am Legend* (2007), the last of which features vampire-zombie hybrids. The most recent additions to this genre are, unsurprisingly, replete with 9/11 and “war on terror” imagery.

The vampire movies that are most likely to treat issues of theology and religion seriously are the gothic melodramas and the art house pictures, while the films in the other categories focus more on entertaining and titillating the audience. Significantly, the gothic melodramas—such as those produced by Great Britain’s Hammer Films studio—are the ones that consistently evoke the bizarre Roman Catholic sensibilities of the classic vampire novel by Bram Stoker (*Dracula*, 1897) and its numerous adaptations.

All vampire movies, to some degree or another, exist in the shadow of Stoker’s novel. The Victorian-era classic portrayed vampires as demonic beings that shrink



Bela Lugosi as Count Dracula, 1931. AP Photo.

in the presence of Roman Catholic objects of faith, especially crucifixes, rosary beads, holy water, and the Eucharist. When the novel was adapted into a stage play and then into film in *Dracula* (1931), much of the Catholic iconography was retained and brought to the screen. Vampires have been tied inextricably to the Catholic Church ever since.

Some of the most interesting vampire films, from both an artistic and theological perspective, are those that explore the connection between vampirism and Catholicism, often by positing theories for the origins of vampirism and by considering the possibility that a penitent vampire might be “cured” or redeemed. Since Stoker’s novel does not explain clearly or definitively how the nobleman became a vampire and does not explain where the first vampire came from, the makers of films derived from the book have felt free to invent their own origins for the curse, many of which are intriguing and deliberately vague. For example, in *The Brides of Dracula* (1960), Dracula’s archenemy Professor Van Helsing explains that vampirism is a “strange sickness” that is “partly physical, partly spiritual” and is “most prevalent in Transylvania and the lower Danube.” It will inevitably spread like a contagion “unless it is stamped out.” He later cryptically observes that “the Cult of Vampirism” is “a survival of one of the ancient pagan religions in their struggle against Christianity.”

Alternatively, *The Forsaken* (2001) traces the origins of vampirism to the siege of Antioch during the Crusades, in which 200 French knights were wiped out by the Turkish army. Following the battle, as nine surviving knights found themselves freezing to death in a blizzard, the demon Banta appears to them, offering them immortality in exchange for their souls. Eight accept and are instructed to “kill and drink the blood of the knight who refused. When the sun rose, they were so ashamed of what they did, they hid in caves until night fell again.” From then on, the undead knights are cursed to drink blood, avoid the sun, and win legions of new souls for Banta by spreading vampirism across the globe.

The Turks are offered a place of prominence in yet another account of the birth of vampirism. Francis Ford Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992) features a prologue suggesting that Dracula is Vlad the Impaler come back from the grave. The segment takes place in 1462 and shows a still human Vlad Dracul returning home from a military campaign against the Turks. Upon his arrival, he is shocked to discover that his true love has committed suicide because she falsely believed that he had perished in combat. A priest informs him unsympathetically that all suicides are damned according to “God’s law.” Vlad raves, “Is this my reward for defending God’s Church? I renounce God! I shall rise from my own death to avenge hers with all the powers of darkness.” He then performs a dark inversion of communion, drinking blood from a chalice and proclaiming, “The blood is the life, and it shall be mine.” Thus, Dracula was born.

Rather than suggesting that Dracula was Vlad the Impaler in life, the film *Dracula 2000* (2000) posits that Dracula is Judas Iscariot come back from the dead after hanging himself. Throughout the film, heroine Mary Van Helsing wonders why Dracula hates silver and the crucifix, why he speaks Aramaic, and why he calls the Bible propaganda. When the heroine discovers his identity, Dracula confesses the source of his rage: “You cannot imagine what I’ve had to endure. I have borne the very wrath of God. Chosen to suffer like no man before.” Dracula/Judas is particularly angry at his own contradictory role in Jesus’ fate—he was the key to the narrative’s fulfillment, yet he is condemned as a traitor. Addressing the image of Jesus painted on a giant crucifix, Dracula storms, “You knew this would come to pass. It was my destiny to betray you because you needed me. Now I drink the blood of your children, but I give them more than just eternal life. I give them what they crave most. All the pleasure you would deny them . . . forever. You made the world in your image, but now I make it in mine.” At the end of both *Dracula 2000* and Coppola’s *Dracula*, a heroic woman slays Dracula and prays for his immortal soul, offering the possibility that the love of a sympathetic woman can inspire God to forgive even the prince of darkness himself.

Vampires frequently hope for redemption or a cure for their condition but are rarely granted any form of peace beyond being decapitated or pierced through the

heart with a wooden stake. Barnabas Collins, the reluctant vampire of television's *Dark Shadows* (ABC, 1966–1971), was granted several “remissions” from his curse; he had better luck than *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) Countess Zeleska, who begged God, psychiatry, and science for redemption but ended up being killed with a bow and arrow, while *The Kiss of the Vampire* (1963) touches upon the possibility of a vampire redeeming himself (or herself).

The *Subspecies* series (*Subspecies* [1991]; *Subspecies II: Bloodstone* [1993]; *Subspecies III: Bloodlust* [1994]; *Subspecies IV: Bloodstorm* [1998]) introduces the idea of a Roman Catholic artifact that neither destroys nor cures a vampire but satiates its desire for human blood, thereby allowing it to live in peace with the human world. This artifact, dubbed the Bloodstone, is a hollow crystal that magically fills with “the blood of all the saints” every time it is held by a vampire. According to the film, the pope had been the guardian of the Bloodstone until the 15th century, when a Romanian gypsy stole it and presented it to the king of the vampires as a peace offering in exchange for his people's safety. Since then, the vampires have lived off of the Bloodstone and have never attacked another human. When the first film begins, the vampire king dies, and over the course of three sequels his rightful heirs battle for possession of the Bloodstone. The heroine, a “good” vampire, wishes to live in peace with humans, and the “evil” vampire wishes to use the Bloodstone to strengthen his magical power even as he breaks the treaty with humanity.

These films are among the most notable to embrace the connection between vampirism and Catholicism, and their filmmakers appear to have enjoyed exploring the notion that vampires exist in a universe in which Jesus Christ is undoubtedly God and Roman Catholicism is the true faith. Other storytellers have played with the notion in even more exploitative ways and have painted the clergy as more evil than vampires or have portrayed Jesus as, conversely, either a vampire or vampire hunter. Still other filmmakers have expressed interest in vampires but not in Catholicism and have refuted or ignored the Catholic connection. Both of the comedies *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967) and *Love at First Bite* star Jewish vampires, leading the one in the former to exclaim when threatened with a crucifix: “Oy! Have you got the wrong vampire!”

One of the most creative, multicultural solutions to the “Catholic” issue is presented in *The Legend of the 7 Golden Vampires* (1974), which takes place in Chung King in 1904. The film is presented as a sequel to the *Dracula* story and features Van Helsing as a heroic man of action who travels the world fighting vampires. In one key scene, Van Helsing explains to his Chinese compatriots that vampires “abhor anything that has a holy significance. They fear the word of the Lord. In Europe, the vampire walks in dread of the crucifix. Here, it would be the image of the Lord Buddha.” It is not clear whether the vampires fear the Buddha

because the Buddha is as “real” as the Christian messiah or because the vampire hunter is protected by a fundamental faith or goodness that is in the heart of every religious person, no matter what his religious affiliation. Both *Salem’s Lot* and *Fright Night* (1985) suggest, for example, that a cross will not keep a vampire at bay unless the human using it has genuine faith (but they only hint at what “genuine faith” might be).

Other filmmakers have stripped their films of Catholic elements by suggesting that vampires are not supernatural but aliens (*Lifeforce* [1985]), or the product of viral infection (*The Last Man on Earth* [1964], based on Richard Matheson’s 1954 novella *I am Legend*), or have suggested that vampires are supernatural but do not fear the crucifix (*Interview with a Vampire* [1994]). Two of the most creative departures from the traditional view of the vampire include *The Lair of the White Worm* (1988)—which features a serpentine vampire who fears the mongoose and who can be captivated by a snake-charmer—and the swashbuckling adventure yarn *Captain Kronos—Vampire Hunter* (1974), which presents creatures who walk by day and drain their victims of youth rather than blood. Catholicism is downplayed in *Dark Shadows*, in which Barnabas Collins is transformed into a vampire by Angelique Bouchard’s voodoo curse, and throughout the series he seeks a cure through scientific rather than theological means.

Most recently, filmmakers have traveled even farther from the Catholic connection, and used vampire narratives not only as a forum to explore sexuality generally but also as a backdrop in which to discuss first love, teenage sexuality, sexual activity, virginity, and abstinence. The Norwegian film *Låt den rätte komma in* (*Let the Right One In*, 2008) emphasizes the danger, violence, and ultra-sexuality in the first love of its preteen protagonists, a 12-year-old human and a seemingly young female vampire. The movie presents each murder by the child/serial-killer vampire as brutal and tragic, and instead of making the emotions of the lovers seem “safe,” it explores the darkest of the young boy’s emotions, including rage, lust, and despair, and the consequences of acting on these feelings. Similarly, the widespread popularity of *Twilight* (2008), based on the first of a series of young adult vampire books by Mormon author Stephanie Meyer, has been attributed to the way in which it makes taboo subjects such as teen sexuality more approachable, largely because of its thinly veiled message of abstinence. Focusing on a young girl who falls in love with a vampire (who has taken an oath not to kill humans), their forbidden love is challenged by outside figures—including members of the each character’s extended “family” who do not trust the other—in an extended metaphor of the age-old formula of teen rebellion.

These vampires are all clearly vampires, but the variations in their portrayals and their appearance and abilities mean that they are different species of vampires. In fact, to some degree, there are as many species of vampires as there are species of

vampire film. (The role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade* capitalizes on these differences by cataloguing and codifying the different species of vampire, serving as inspiration for *Kindred: The Embraced* [1996].) As a general rule of thumb, the more supernatural the vampire is portrayed as being, the more likely the film will address religious issues. Conversely, the more human the vampire seems, the more likely the film is using the creature as a vehicle to address more secular concerns. Less supernatural variations of the concept have been known to treat vampirism as a disease akin to AIDS, wherein the vampire is not undead so much as afflicted by a need for constant transfusions of fresh blood. Vampirism has also served as a metaphor for drug addiction, rape, nymphomania, necrophilia, and mass hysteria.

Those vampire films that explore religion and Catholicism tend to focus on the darker regions of faith and organized religion. They meditate on the possibility that God is not as fair and forgiving as is often portrayed. They fixate on injustices in church law and history, especially the persistent belief that all non-Catholics are misguided or evil, inspiring the horrors of the Inquisition, the Crusades, and the Catholic Reformation. These films are particularly concerned with church law assigning suicides to hell and identifying sexual pleasure as sinful. In effect, the films invite the viewer to weep for all the damned in hell, and for the vampires. They do this even as they celebrate, seemingly paradoxically, the ultimate triumph of the just (and of the immensely likeable Professor Van Helsing) over the forces of darkness. In that respect, vampire films have their cake and eat it too, allowing the viewers to live vicariously through the vampires—unchain the most secret desires of the id—and safely see these sinful impulses vanquished at the end of the film, when a stake is driven through the vampire's heart.

Marc DiPaolo

See also: Catholicism; Coppola, Francis Ford; Horror; Science Fiction; Voodoo.

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