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A Century of Draculas

James Craig Holte

“Listen to them, the children of the night, what music they make.”

Dracula

Vampires have always been shape shifters. Throughout their long and varied history, vampires have been able to transform themselves to satisfy their own needs, and the needs of readers and viewers as well. Even in its most ancient past, over three thousand years ago in the Himalayan mountains, the earliest vampire lived in a multiplicity of forms, including that of the mother goddess, Kali, and the Tibetan lord of the dead, Yama. From this homeland, according to some scholars, vampires and vampire legends moved outward into India, China, Japan, and then westward into Eastern Europe, Greece, Arabia, and Africa, eventually reaching Western Europe and the Americas. In every culture they entered, vampires adapted, taking on different shapes and habits, feeding on fish in Malaysia, elephants in India, virgins in nineteenth-century European literature, and evildoers in the later works of Anne Rice. In 1997, the centennial of the publication of *Dracula*, vampires have become the subject of literary conferences, film festivals, media events, and special issues of journals.

As Raymond McNally and Radu Florescu have demonstrated, the vampire has always been a creature of many faces, and the Western vampire tradition, influenced heavily by Eastern European folklore, has always associated transformations with vampires. Vampires have been thought to be able to take a variety of shapes, including those of the dog, wolf, cat, and bat, all animals associated with witchcraft and the demonic. In addition, it has been believed that vampires can take the form of mist, smoke, and fog.

Even within the much more confined context of the literary vampire narratives, the image of the vampire is continually changing. In nineteenth-century British fiction, for example, there are a variety of famous vampires, each unique. In *The Vampyre* in 1819 John Polidori introduced Lord Ruthven, a vampire as typical gothic villain, and established the vampire craze of the nineteenth century that resulted in a flood of German poetry, French drama, and British fiction. In the mid-1840s British readers were treated to *Varney the Vampire or the Feast of Blood*, which appeared in

109 weekly installments and was later published in a single, successful 800-page volume. Varney is far more cruel and bloody than Ruthven. Sheridan Le Fanu published, "Carmilla," in *In a Glass Darkly* in 1872, introducing readers to an erotic lesbian vampire. One hundred years ago in 1897 Bram Stoker published *Dracula*, fixing the character of the Transylvanian nobleman as the archetypal vampire forever in the public imagination. Each of these major nineteenth-century vampires resembles the others in some aspects—cold white skin, blood hungers, mesmeric powers—but each is a unique character. Despite their differences, all the nineteenth century vampires are figures of evil.

The transformations of Dracula, who has become the vampire in the popular imagination, however, are different. In Bram Stoker's novel Dracula is a white haired Eastern European patriarch with bad breath and hairy palms. He is also a powerful aristocrat who dominates both men and women. However in the film adaptations of *Dracula*, the primary source of vampire legend and lore for twentieth-century vampire followers, the character shifts shapes constantly, creating in the public imagination a composite Count Dracula who has become a universally recognized cultural icon. As Barbara Belford noted in her recent biography of Bram Stoker, *Bram Stoker: A Biography of the author of Dracula* (New York: Knopf, 1996):

Dracula will be one hundred years old in 1997. Had Stoker achieved the physical immortality of his creation, the now-150-year-old writer would be amazed that his novel has been translated into forty-four languages; that Count Dracula, the most filmed character in film history after Sherlock Holmes, has usurped the red devil with the pitchfork and pointed tail as the preferred icon of evil; that members of "fang" clubs subscribe to newsletters extolling vampires and even in the age of AIDS, self-styled vampires drink blood, but from monogamous donors.
(x)

Bram Stoker used many sources in writing *Dracula*: previous English vampire narratives, the conventions of the gothic novel, Eastern European folklore and history, and travel accounts. Stoker's novel was popular, and it has remained so. Readers were captured by the novel, and the dramatic possibilities of the novel, first recognized by Stoker himself who organized a dramatic reading of the novel upon *Dracula*'s publication, were seized upon by a host of later adapters, each of whom refashioned the Count in his or her own image. As a result, the images of Dracula that have appeared in darkened theaters, and later on television sets, of the twentieth century are quite different from one another. Max Schreck's emaciated Count Orlok from the 1922 *Nosferatu* is the antithesis of Bela Lugosi's Eastern European aristocrat

from Tod Browning's 1931 *Dracula*. Christopher Lee's powerful Dracula of the popular Hammer Films series stands in sharp contrast to Frank Langella's romantic portrayal of the vampire in the popular 1979 adaptation of *Dracula*. Gary Oldman presents Dracula as both a monster and a handsome prince in Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, and Leslie Neilson plays Dracula as a comic character in Mel Brook's 1995 *Dracula: Dead and Loving It*. Even a single actor shifts shapes when playing the vampire. In the eight films in which he played Dracula, Christopher Lee portrayed the title character in a variety of ways, from an inarticulate killing machine to a suave seducer. It is obvious that it is dangerous to enter the world of vampires and make any generalizations, because as soon as a theory is developed to fix the figure of the vampire the creature transforms itself into something new. Like Van Helsing's notes, however, this special issue of *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* is an attempt to search out and discover the truth about Dracula and other children of the night.

Theories about *Dracula's* popularity abound. Critics and scholars have pointed out the obvious attractions of the vampire narrative. Dracula is a powerful authoritarian figure who has few restraints; he is a creature of great hungers who rejects all of the conventions of a civilized society in order to satisfy his urges. In his representation of the other, the foreign other and the other within, Dracula celebrates self-gratification and self-assertion.

There is no doubt about the increasing visibility and popularity of vampires in general and Dracula in particular; in the last decades of the twentieth century vampires are everywhere. In fiction, the enormous popularity of Anne Rice's Vampire Chronicles as well as the continued success of the vampire narratives of such fine contemporary writers as Suzy McKee Charnas, Kim Newman, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, and Fred Saberhagen clearly demonstrate the existence of a large audience for vampire narratives. As usual in the popular culture, film follows fiction, and both large and small screen vampires have appeared with increasing frequency throughout the century. Over the past twenty-five years, dozens of vampire films have been released each year, ranging in quality from such dreadful movies as *My Grandpa Is a Vampire* (1992) and *Vampire Cop* (1990) to such interesting films as *Innocent Blood* (1992) and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992). The increase in the number of vampire films in general, as well as the adaptations of *Dracula*, can be explained in part by such factors as the change in the MPPA code, the explosion of the video industry, and the continued growth of the youth culture. There is, however, something about the nature of the vampire and the character of Dracula that has made the Count the most popular horror character of the late twentieth century. Vampire narratives have, in fact, become a genre of their own, and if genre theorists are correct in seeing genres as structures of narrative conventions carrying out a variety of

cultural functions in a unified way, the popularity and development of vampire narratives is worth careful examination.

The vampire narrative, best known in *Dracula* and the many *Dracula* adaptations, both on paper and on screen, and now moving into cyberspace, has established itself as a genre, a discrete narrative type with its own history, conventions, and audience expectations; and although the core structure of the narrative has remained consistent—vampires feed on humans, may live forever, and are not bound by the conventions of society—audiences' attitudes toward the vampire attitudes have changed. *Dracula* has been evolving from monster to hero. In Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* represents both subversive violence and a threat to order and progress. Victorian readers, believers in order and progress and, at least theoretically, uncomfortable with subversive sexuality and violence, read the vampire as a monster. Modern, or perhaps post-modern would be more accurate, readers and viewers, however, disillusioned by the failures of order and progress and more comfortable with sexuality, read *Dracula* quite differently. For contemporary readers *Dracula* is an attractive figure, as the proliferation of *Dracula* societies and fan clubs clearly attests, as does the popularity of such contemporary critics as David Skal, Nina Auerbach, Raymond McNally, and J. Gordon Melton. Contemporary filmmakers view *Dracula* in a similar way.

The early adaptations of *Dracula*—F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*, Tod Browning's *Dracula*, and Terence Fisher's *Horror of Dracula*—although different in their portrayal of the Count, all emphasized the monstrous elements of *Dracula*. More recent adaptations, however, following the more positive depictions of vampires in the works of Rice, Saberhagen, and Yarbro, depict *Dracula* as a romantic hero, and in doing so help establish a new narrative form, the dark romance.

Three recent adaptations of Stoker's *Dracula* illustrate this development. The first was the critically acclaimed *Count Dracula* made for television in 1978 and shown on PBS. Louis Jordan portrayed *Dracula* as a romantic hero rather than a blood-sucking monster, and the two-and-a-half hour production was both faithful to Stoker's text and sympathetic to Stoker's title character. The second is the 1979 *Dracula*, directed by John Badham and starring Frank Langella. Based on the authorized 1927 Deane/Balderston adaptation, the film was planned after Langella played *Dracula* in Massachusetts and on Broadway. On stage Langella combined romanticism with comedy, but in the film Langella's *Dracula* is a wise sensual lover, aware of the limitations of his immortality. Rather than reveling in his condition, as did earlier *Draculas*, Langella's *Dracula* suffers, and as a result he becomes a sympathetic figure. Francis Ford Coppola takes this reading of the text even farther in his 1992 *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, which is actually a love story disguised as a horror movie. Gary Oldman's vampire is more

handsome Prince Vlad than Count Dracula, as the film's Mina correctly concludes, and by providing the historical background for his title character Coppola removes some of the mystery and menace from the story. The result is a dark version of *Beauty and the Beast*, a romance, even with all of the blood and fangs that Coppola provides for his audience.

Other vampire films have followed the pattern established by the writers of fiction and the adapters of *Dracula*, and as a result filmmakers and audiences make meaning of these narratives through a century of shared experiences and expectations. Contemporary vampire narratives draw on the conventions and images created by Stoker, Lugosi, and Lee, but they are developing new conventions as attitudes toward authority, power, gender, and eroticism change. All *Dracula* narratives are about sexuality and violence, and the contemporary *Draculas*, whether appearing in visually stunning, operatic films such as *Bram Stoker's Dracula* or less expensive movies like *Dracula: Dead and Loving It*, are far more sympathetic and self aware than early ones. In some vampire films, such as *Innocent Blood* (1992), this development has gone so far as to suggest that the vampires are good and the vampire hunters evil, a complete reversal of the vampire narrative's original conventions.

This continuing development of the character of Dracula is possible because both filmmakers and audiences are aware of the history and conventions of the genre and are willing to participate in their adaptation. Part of the appreciation engendered by any genre is the recognition of the familiar and the delight in the variations. When we watch a contemporary vampire film or adaptation of *Dracula* we are witnessing a variation on an ancient and honorable theme—the confrontation between good and evil. At a time when there is more than a little uncertainty about the nature of good and evil, *Dracula*, in all his forms, provides readers and viewers with some useful signs of the times.

In this special issue of *JFA*, I have collected various perspectives on the figure of the revenant, Dracula himself, the novel *Dracula*, and Stoker's life and times. Katie Harse and Stephanie Moss bring to bear historical background and primary cultural sources to create approaches to Stoker's novel. Susan Cribb's reading in "'If I had to write with a pen': Readership and Bram Stoker's Diary Narrative," reinterprets the narrative structure of *Dracula*, while Joe Sutcliff Sanders interrogates the narrative closure and structure of Stephen King's tribute to Stoker, *Salem's Lot*. Joonas Smitherman Trapp investigates another novel with close ties to *Dracula* and finds layers of social criticism in Dan Simmons' *Children of the Night*. In "Not All Fangs Are Phallic: Female Film Vampires" I attempt to trace the increasingly complex figure of the female vampire in literature and film and the influence of Stoker's novel on that figure. Finally, in "Back to Basics: Re-Examining Stoker's Sources for *Dracula*" Elizabeth Miller, head of the Canadian

Transylvanian Society of Dracula and one of the most productive *Dracula* scholars in the world, calls for a return to Stoker's text and his source material for an understanding of the Dracula legend. In addition, she points out the numerous critical errors and exaggerations that have become part of the critical lore about the Count and need to be staked. Enjoy.