

The Vampire's Reflection:
The Changing Metaphor of Vampires in Cinema

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The irony of a creature with no reflection becoming such a pervasive reflection of modern culture pleases in a dark way. Indeed, dark pleasure nestles in the heart of the allure of the vampire tale. From the earliest days of cinema to the present, vampires mesmerized their way into our cinematic vocabulary; the unchanging undead displaying the ever-changing facets of our conscious and unconscious fears:

An ambiguously coded figure, a source of both erotic anxiety and corrupt desire, the literary vampire is one of the most powerful archetypes bequeathed to us from the imagination of the nineteenth century. Vampire tales have been and, in some cases, continue to be "grisly nightmares that touch on the basic fears that make us all vulnerable." More relevant . . . however, is Nina Auerbach's elegantly simple observation that "every age embraces the vampire that it needs."

(Gordon and Hollinger 1)

The ambiguous nature of the vampire lends itself to our subtle manipulations, making it possible to define it as a "late twentieth-century necessity" (Gordon and Hollinger 1).

The original repertoire of the vampiric metaphor consisted of repressed sexuality and fears of both death and the power of the antichrist: no wonder that this mixture of physical and spiritual sin immediately possessed our collective imaginations. The symptomatic similarities between death from a vampire's bite and death by consumption (all puns aside) denote the initial embrace of the vampire-as-disease metaphor: the

'associations with wasting, with paleness, with blood flow from the mouth, night restlessness, alternate burning and chills, even the victim's rumored sexual energy' make the vampire a "natural metaphor for the symptoms of tuberculosis" (Gordon and Hollinger 6). A resurrection of the vampire movie genre coinciding with public awareness of AIDS posits another, more contemporary example of the vampire as disease. The religious trappings of the early movies contrast markedly with the failure or debunking of them in more modern films. The most striking difference between early and late twentieth-century vampires lies in the increasing empathy of their portrayals. Even if irredeemable, modern vampires are often sympathetic in tellingly human ways:

The figure of the vampire, as metaphor, can tell us about sexuality, of course, and about power; it can also inscribe more contemporary concerns, such as relations of power and alienation, attitudes toward illness, and the definition of evil at the end of an unprecedentedly secular century. And it can help to clarify the nature of the fantastic realities that seem occasionally to overwhelm the empirical. (Gordon and Hollinger 3)

Cinematically speaking, vampire tales began with Nosferatu, an unauthorized German retelling of Bram Stoker's novel, which engendered lawsuits and ill feelings from the Stoker's estate. In this version, the vampire (played by Max Schreck) looks frighteningly misshapen and alien. He mesmerizes his victims, because if he did not do so they would flee from just the sight of him; conversely, such a portrayal falls far from Bela Lugosi's elegant, aristocratic Count. Lugosi's Dracula embodies seduction: he fascinates women and men equally and with virtually no discrimination. Although recent portrayals often show a beast-like, as well as human, visage, the urbane image of the

vampire remains the most popular. All subsequent film vampires can be compared and contrasted to these two seminal versions; they hold the original canon for the vampire film genre.

Sex and violence entwined permeates the central tenets of vampire films; the voyeuristic thrill of watching Lugos's Dracula sneak into a helpless woman's bedroom to accost not only her body, but also her immortal soul, pales in comparison to later extremes. The newly enacted power of the Production Code Administration in the mid-1930s resulted in "toning down much of the emphasis on sadism and torment characteristic of the films of the early '30s" (Joslin 123). Consequently, many of the Universal films, "while atmospheric, lack the manic edge of the earlier films" and "By the 40's, they had become standard studio product, mostly familiar and formulaic" (Joslin 123). The '40s and '50s presented a series of uninspiring vampires including Lon Chaney, Jr. (Son of Dracula), and John Carradine (House of Dracula). Sex and violence, however, as well as the viewing public, returned to vampire films with the emergence of Christopher Lee in Dracula (1958), establishing him as the "cinema's new king of vampires" (Skal 213). By 1965's Dracula, Prince of Darkness, we see Lee opening his shirt, cutting his chest with his fingernails and causing a, presumably mesmerized, woman to suck blood off his bare chest; arguably, countless Goth fantasies grew out of this moment, seemingly tame by present-day standards but uncomfortably perverse in a time period when the cinema depicted married couples as sleeping in twin beds. In 1970's Daughters of Darkness, couples engage in a sadomasochistic relationship before their inevitable deaths. 1983's The Hunger shows Catherine Deneuve and David Bowie participating in sexual acts with their victims before killing them to feed. Gary Oldman's 1992 depiction

of Dracula returns seduction, flavored with obsession, to the vampire film: he desires Mina for more than liquid sustenance. The vampire strippers in From Dusk Till Dawn revel in their sensuality, using it for camouflage as well as bait. Ultimately, the changing metaphors of sex and violence in vampire films leads to the homoeroticism of Lestat, Louis and Armand in 1994's Interview with the Vampire; Lugosi's Dracula toyed with men but never like this. Scores of vampire movies depict a subtle (or not so subtle) lesbianism--Daughters of Darkness, for instance--but Interview encourages a mainstream audience to participate in male-male relations that embody the emotional overtones of a homosexual relationship even if the physical contact between the characters remains curiously asexual. Debatably, the vampire film's metaphorical context allows a wide American audience to accept homoerotic protagonists with fewer qualms than normally evincible.

In early vampire films, the requirements for victory were few: armed with crucifixes, wooden stakes, holy water, garlic and occasionally fire and sunlight, good always prevailed. Before long, any two objects held in a cruciform capably fended off the vampire, providing the wielder possessed true faith. Conversely, this implied that symbols of faith, when handled by those of less-than-perfect or non-existent faith, might prove ineffective. As 1960's American culture demonstrated an increasingly secular view of the world, more cinematic vampire victims died as a result of their lack of faith. As humanity confronted the dangers of loss of faith, however, the vampires lost some of their magical arsenal.

Early vampires possessed the ability to transform into bats and wolves and to command those creatures obedience; they crawled vertical surfaces in defiance of gravity

and disappeared in a puff of smoke. The more contemporary vampire demonstrates “very little of that metaphysical, anti-Christian dimension, and his or her evil acts are expressions of individual personality and condition, not of any cosmic conflict between God and Satan” (Zanger 18). The lessening of the vampire’s “metaphysical and religious status” results in a “parallel loss of many of their folkloric attributes”:

Though still possessing preternatural strength and shunning the light, most contemporary vampires have lost their mutability, which is the essence of all magic. They can no longer transform themselves into bats or mist or wolves or puffs of smoke; in addition, they need no longer wait to be invited over a threshold, and mirrors and crucifixes appear to have relatively little effect on them. When Louis, the vampire who narrates Rice’s Interview with the Vampire (1976), is asked about his magical powers, he responds: “That is, how would you say today . . . bullshit?”. (Zanger 19)

This metamorphosis from “metaphoric Anti-Christ to secular sinner, from magical to mundane” permeates the appearance of and indeed, permits the “existence of ‘good’ vampires as well as bad ones” (Zanger 19). The vampire transforms from an “earthly embodiment of supernal Evil” to simply an “alien other”: “No longer embodying metaphysical evil, no longer a damned soul, the new vampire has become, in our concerned awareness for multiculturalism, merely ethnic . . .” (Zanger 19).

While tempting, in retrospect, to interpret The Hunger as “an extended AIDS allegory,” Nicola Nixon reminds us that its filming and release (1982-1983) took place when “only about 800 AIDS-type cases [were] documented in America and fewer than

400 in England' (118). Nixon contends that The Hunger, as well as films like 1987's The Lost Boys, result from (admittedly different) reactions to the conditions imposed by the Reagan era. The Hunger, with its elegant and trendy vampires, indicts the 'yuppie consumerism' encouraged by Reagan economics policies; The Lost Boys, with its distortion of the nuclear family and willful blindness towards the local threat of vampirism, critiques the 'nebulously idealized family' and 'avoidance of the AIDS crisis' of the Reagan social policies (Gordon and Hollinger 1).

Rob Latham professes the government-as-vampire metaphor 'derives from Marx himself' (129). Latham views the 'carnival-esque boardwalk' of The Lost Boys as representational of adolescent consumerism (141); likewise the casting of Deneuve and Bowie 'strikingly enacted' the connection between youth and consumerism in that both actors marketed 'consumer objects—rock albums, skin lotions—to youth audiences' and maintained 'a preternaturally youthful appearance into middle age' (Latham 140). Although the teenagers in The Lost Boys seem empowered by the 'confused and confusing domain of fun and danger' that the boardwalk creates, and even if 'their empowerment amounts to a great deal more than the power to affront,' it remains to be said that they do not really 'own the boardwalk' (Latham 146-147):

The result is an ambivalent dialectic of empowerment and exploitation, in which the teens are both consumers and consumed, vampires and victims. What Moretti says of *Dracula*—that it operates by means of 'dialectical relations, in which the opposites, instead of separating out and entering into conflict, exist in function of one another, reinforce one another' (emphasis in original)—is equally true of The Lost Boys, which maintains

throughout, in a state of dialectical tension, opposing visions of youth consumption—and, indeed, consumption generally. (Latham 147)

The young vampires in The Lost Boys appear to be the consumers but, in the end, are revealed to be pawns of the older vampire who merely uses them to his own profit: proving that they are lost in more ways than one.

Veronica Hollinger suggests that contemporary vampire tales often “mirror aspects of that peculiar human condition which has come to be termed postmodernism:”

One of the most succinct definitions of postmodernism, and certainly one of the most influential, is Jean-Francois Lyotard’s summation of this “condition” as “incredulity towards metanarratives,” that is, as the loss of faith in totalizing stories such as capitol-H History, capitol-S Science, or capital-R Religion. (199)

What better explanation possible for the central theme of Interview with the Vampire? Lestat defines the notion of the postmodern vampire: he eschews any sort of faith, other than faith in himself. Louis spends the entire film struggling against becoming postmodern: he equates that sort of “loss of faith” with the final loss of his remaining humanity. Louis finds comfort in metanarratives; Lestat displays an abandoned anger at them. One of the film’s “most telling postmodern ploys” portrays the vampires as “themselves obsessed about questions of good and evil” (Hollinger 203). Claudia, the child vampire, grows up (emotionally, at least) in a situation somewhat akin to being raised by atheists: she cannot comprehend why Louis and Lestat even consider these questions compelling. Armand, living in a coven obsessed with the old rules of vampirism, demonstrates his desire to connect with Louis by allowing Louis to burn down their lair.

Armand feels cut adrift from the age and intuits the postmodernist outlook that Louis struggles against represents what Armand needs to learn to continue to survive. In an increasingly secular society where media-savvy instincts leap to questioning authority more often than accepting it, the postmodern vampire may personify nearly all of us.

The cinematic vampire has reigned for eighty years and the fascination of its audience, while waxing and waning, never completely disappears. Every age does indeed seem to embrace “the vampire that it needs” (Gordon and Hollinger 1). It guides us along the “paths of hegemony and disenfranchisement, economy . . . , socialization and separation” (Gordon and Hollinger 7). Whether our fears are ephemeral, eternal, societal or personal, the vampiric metaphor continually transforms its mythic themes as readily as Dracula turns into a bat and frightens us in comforting ways. The themes of sexual desire, disease, consumption, political indifference and religious conflict permeate the vampire film:

Such themes suggest our current anxieties about the dissolutions of boundaries between the private and the public, the individual and society, one social group or nation and another, and ourselves and our environment. How apt that the vampire reflects such border anxieties, since it penetrates boundaries by its very nature—between life and death, between love and fear, between power and persecution. And how apt that it thrives in this postmodern milieu of dissolving borders, between the virtual and the real, between private and public personae, in the breaking down of cultural and national boundaries, while a plague transmitted by

the penetration of bodily boundaries and often by blood-sweeps the world.

(Gordon and Hollinger 7)

The vampire represents one of the most fecund metaphors gifted us from the nineteenth-century imagination to the twentieth. It has grown like Moonflowers, blooming in the dark, perfuming our dreams with equal measures of anticipation and dread. As we enter into the twenty-first century one thing is assured, the vampire as metaphor appears eternal and undoubtedly will stalk us forever.

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