ESSAI

Volume 6 Article 23

4-1-2008

Dracula: Bram Stoker Meets Francis Ford Coppola

Joel Griswell
College of DuPage

Dracula: Bram Stoker Meets Francis Ford Coppola

by Joel Griswell

(English 1154)

The character of the Count Dracula has captivated readers for centuries. Bram Stoker's seminal work, *Dracula*, sparked a flurry of stories about vampires and a near cult following of vampirism that lasts till this day. Filmmakers have also been seduced by these classic stories and hundreds of films have revolved around the vampire mythos. Yet, inescapably, these films are drawn back to their classic birthplace—Dracula himself. Classics like F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* in 1922, and Tod Browning's 1931 *Dracula*, starring Bela Lugosi, have cemented the character as a cinematic icon since the earliest days of film. Count Dracula, the king of the undead, has been reborn in countless film adaptations, although many stray far from the storyline of Stoker's original. Enter legendary filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola. Coppola was a fan of the original novel and wanted to make a more faithful adaptation. Released in 1992, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* was a successful re-imagining of Stoker's gothic masterpiece.

Bram Stoker was an Irish author born in the nineteenth century. In *Dracula*, Stoker drew from a rich heritage of vampire legends of the Middle Ages and added a historical realism to the story by incorporating the tale of Vlad "the Impaler" Tepes and thus immortalizing the Dracula myth. Stoker's novel, published in 1897, was also making many commentaries about England and the world in a time of great social change ("Dracula").

Adapting Stoker's words into the 1992 film proved a difficult journey. Screenwriter James V. Hart first wrote a take on the story that emphasized the love story, and turned Dracula into a romantic anti-hero. The script was originally intended to be used for a TV adaptation, but was rejected. Eventually, Winona Ryder came across the script and it was she who sought out Coppola. The director saw the filmic potential in a new retelling of the tale, but was only interested if the adaptation was faithful to Stoker's vision. At the same time, Coppola wanted to create something fresh and inspired, giving the audiences something they had never seen before. Coppola fell in love with Hart's take on the story, and days later the project was in motion (Schumacher 438).

Bram Stoker's Dracula is a largely faithful adaptation of its source material, although inevitably, in the translation from one medium to another, some changes were made. Many previous Dracula films had selectively chosen elements of the original and expanded on those in their own way, removing various secondary characters, setting the story exclusively in Transylvania, transporting the whole myth into a modern landscape, and taking major creative liberties with the portrayal of the Count himself. Hart and Coppola, however, were enamored with Stoker's complete story and Dracula's threatening voyage from Transylvania to the protagonists' home turf in England. Hart also kept previously discarded characters like Lucy's suitors, Arthur Holmwood and the Texan, Quincey Morris, and the Count's servants, the Tartars, who gave the book a more complex and diverse backdrop. Coppola also follows the book's pattern of the Count's reverse aging, becoming younger as the story progresses. True, many details from the novel are passed over for the sake of a more rapid storytelling, yet the film preserves the overall plot structure and settings intact (*Dracula*).

The translation from paper to celluloid was successfully executed, and with great flair. The book is told entirely through journal or newspaper entries, which gives the piece a sense being grounded in reality. Coppola rejected the emerging capabilities of computer effects and instead opted to have all the effects done in-camera. He wanted the film to have an old-school look, using mirrors and "naïve" tricks, as if someone in the nineteenth century had actually filmed on location

(Schumacher 448). Also, to tie into the book's narration formula, Hart incorporates sections of the original text into the film. Anthony Hopkins, playing Abraham Van Helsing, becomes the main narrator of the film. We are also given short journal entries read by Mina and Jonathan that guide us through expository scenes early in the film (*Dracula*).

The production of the film is exceptional. Hart described the prose of the novel as a "wet" and "feverish" dream, and the film reflects this visually with the editing of the film, as well as its visual style (qtd. in Clarke 212). *Bram Stoker's Dracula* is a sumptuous visual feast. The film was shot entirely on sound stages, giving it a highly theatrical look. This deliberate artificiality gave Coppola extreme control to manipulate the film's operatic scope and a magical spirit. Michael Ballhaus' cinematography is luscious, highlighting vibrant reds among pools of dark shadows. Eiko Ishioka's exotically beautiful costumes graphically portray their characters and fill each shot with a sense of mythical grandeur. Thomas Sander's production design gives a stage-like sense of emptiness, isolating the characters, and filling the screen with impending doom. Wojciech Kilar's pounding and lyrical orchestral score reaches from the epic to the intimate (Clarke 214). As a director, Coppola made brilliant choices when it came to hiring his crew. The inspired work gives a sense of seriousness and urgency to the film and elevates it above the typical Hollywood blockbuster. It is truly spectacular to see Stoker's world unfold before your eyes under the hands of a cinematic genius.

Coppola does, however, make a rather serious deviation in the tone and themes of the film and this casts a shadow on the rest of the story, and is largely responsible for the other changes in the adaptation. Bram Stoker wrote his book in the Victorian era. It was a repressed world, yet one on the verge of many new discoveries and much social upheaval. These changes included a more liberal view of sexuality, science, and ethics. Despite Stoker's delving into many of these themes, his novel has a strong sense of absolute truth. He doesn't shy away from describing violence or sexual references, and the novel often incorporates Eastern mystical concepts ("Dracula"). Yet, through it all, the novel retains a strong core of Christian belief that permeates the world and life of the protagonists. Thus, though Stoker presents a very dark world of temptations, it is clearly associated with evil, and it is in clear opposition to the Christian ethic that the book's heroes embrace. It is a very visual and imaginative portrayal of the battle between good versus evil.

Coppola takes a different approach when it comes to the theme of spirituality. Although he doesn't remove the religious elements from the story, he paints them in a very different light. While the novel had a sense of morality defined by faith, the movie is much more ambiguous. The film is filled with Christian imagery, yet its symbolic intent is not always clear. Crucifixes (as well as communion wafers and holy water) in the original are powerful tools given by God to fight the Devil, whereas in the adaptation, the cross motif often seems to highlight a more modern and pessimistic views toward the Church. The use of the cross now almost becomes an attack on clichéd fanatical religiousness. In the hands of Dr. Van Helsing, the cross is used as a weapon. But while the book shows him to be a firm defender of the faith, the film presents him as a near madman, obsessed with vengeance and glory. Thus, we are taken from a world of clear right and wrong into one where these very concepts are put into question.

The film also changes its focus in its use of symbols. Blood is used frequently in the novel. The blood is meant to be a shocking contrast to spirituality. In the practice of communion, Christians celebrate "the blood of Christ" and the cleansing power of blood. When Dracula drinks his victim's blood to keep himself alive, it is a perversion of the act of communion, and thus, a direct attack against God himself ("Dracula"). In the film, blood is a central motif; this adaptation is practically drenched with it. From the extreme close-ups of blood cells from Dr. Seward's microscope, to bleeding necks, to Vlad's scarlet armor and robes, to the photography's red tint, Coppola not only incorporates the motif as used by Stoker but takes it a step further. Coppola's blood becomes a sexual symbol. The fear of sexually transmitted diseases is felt throughout this film as the danger of the

unknown. During this time, Coppola was also developing a project about AIDS, and many of those ideas seem to carry into *Dracula* (Clarke 213). It is this blood that comes to dominate the film, and represents Mina's surrendering to Dracula, as in one central scene where she literally drinks blood from the Count's chest. Ultimately, blood becomes not a sacrilegious insult to Christianity, but an erotic bond that unifies the characters in the film, both physically and aesthetically. The red embodies both the horror and pain in the story, but also the passion and romance (Stoker).

Thus, instead of religious faith being the driving force behind the story, the filmmakers decided to replace this with a new element—romance. Stoker's work presents a clear distinction between the sexually conservative Victorian life and the alluringly erotic world of the evil undead (most obviously embodied in the Count's three "brides"). The novel's strong and intelligent heroine, Mina Murray, is an image of innocence, purity and faith, a woman firmly in keeping with the strict boundaries of traditional Victorian ideals. The romance is the novel is minimal, with Mina's marriage to Jonathan Harker not one of strong passions, but led by respect and devotion.

The film nearly flips this moral compass on its head. Coppola described his impressions of Hart's script as story soaked in "passion and eroticism" (qtd. in Schumacher 437). This is where the plot and characters of the film most radically differ from the original material. The new take becomes a very romantic one—essentially a love story between Dracula and Mina. In a journal entry, Coppola described this relationship as two eternal "souls reaching out through a universe of horror and pathos," an element not found in the novel (Clarke 213).

In fact, for the film, Hart and Coppola literally create a new life for the two lovers. This extends Stoker's characters into a mythic past. Winona Ryder thus not only plays Mina, but also appears in the beginning of the film as Elisabeta, the wife of Lord Vlad. Elisabeta commits suicide upon hearing of Vlad's supposed death. When Vlad (then a crusader for the Church) returns victorious from battle to find his wife excommunicated for her suicide, he runs his sword through a giant cross, drowning the room in blood, and renounces his faith, condemning himself to an eternity without divine mercy. As the movie progresses, we find Dracula searching for his lost love, and discovering her in the person of Mina (both of whom share a sort of psychic bond when they first meet). Later, Mina almost mystically becomes aware that she is Elisabeta reincarnated and thus destined to be with the Count. Consequentially, the scene where Dracula bites Mina and turns her into a vampire, instead of being a moment of horror and defeat, becomes a passionately erotic, mystical fusion of two souls, fated for each other in eternity (*Dracula)*.

The character of Count Dracula similarly is adjusted. Like Mina, the Count has also been given a mystic link to the past. In the book's third chapter, Dracula proudly recounts that he is a descendant of Prince Vlad (Stoker). In the film, Vlad is Dracula, cursed to be reborn into each new century, desperately searching for his lost soul mate. Instead of being a servant of evil, the ultimate villain, he now becomes a sexually charged and tragic anti-hero. With this new Dracula, played extravagantly by Gary Oldman, sexuality is no longer associated with moral corruption but is used to create a seductively alluring romantic icon.

Ultimately, Coppola's film is a mostly faithful adaptation of Stoker's world, but takes some creative liberties in updating the tale for a modern audience. With a cast of mostly young, handsome, and popular actors, Coppola chose to break the Victorian impositions of the novel and made it appealing to a wider audience. The technical and artistic merits of the film are impressive and give the story the operatic grandeur that it deserves.

Coppola's biggest departure from the novel was the incorporation of the romantic arc between Dracula and Mina. The film closes with them alone, in the same temple-like room where Dracula first abandoned God. Beneath the shadow of the cross, Mina plunges a stake into Dracula's heart, freeing him from an eternity of suffering. Wrapped in Mina's arms, Dracula is finally at peace. Thus, instead of celebrating the defeat of the ultimate evil, as per the novel, we are left with a heartbreaking Shakespearean ending. As the film's tag line states, "love never dies," but in this

thematic change, Bram Stoker's Dracula replaces the Christian faith with erotic romance. This is a drastic move, but one that seems to follow the pattern of many modern adaptations, and no doubt fueled the success of the film, especially among younger audiences. This change aside, the 1992 film is a faithful and vibrant adaptation of Stoker's masterpiece. Coppola and Hart wanted to return to the original book, and for the most part, their goal was spectacularly accomplished, and this intoxicating film is worthy of its title—Bram Stoker's Dracula.

Works Cited

Bram Stoker's Dracula. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Gary Oldman, Winona Ryder, Anthony Hopkins, Keanu Reeves. Columbia Pictures, 1992.

Clarke, James. Coppola (Virgin Film). London: Virgin Books, 2003.

"Dracula: Bram Stoker." Rev. of *Dracula*. *SparkNotes*. 2 July 2008. <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dracula/>

Schumacher, Michael. *Francis Ford Coppola: A Filmmaker's Life*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1999.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula (Enriched Classics Series*). New York: Simon & Schuster/Pocket, 2003.