

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities

Summary of the Dissertation

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**Reinterpretations of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in contemporary
vampire movies**

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Aims and research questions

The popularity of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has not decreased in the last one hundred and twenty years: the novel has never been out of print, it has been translated into many different languages and it has been adapted for various media (movies, comics, theatre plays, videogames, etc.). This is one of the reasons why the Dracula-phenomenon cannot be viewed only from one scientific perspective: besides the literature and cultural studies we cannot ignore the geographical, historical and psychological researches. The Dracula-myth is adapted even in these days: Gary Shore's vampire movie, the *Dracula Untold*, was presented in 2014; between 2013 and 2014 Cole Haddon directed a ten episode long TV series; in 2018 Dacre Stoker and J. D. Barker published the *Dracul*, the official prequel of Bram Stoker's novel; and in 2019 two *Dracula*-adaptations are still in progress (Márk Bodzsár's *Comrade Drakulich* and a vampire movie directed by Róbert Árpád Lakatos which is based on Károly Lajthay's silent movie from 1921). These examples make it clear that an extensive approach of the Dracula-myth is not possible not only because of the various forms of adaptations of the Dracula-myth, but also due to the dynamic increase of the phenomena.

Due to the diversification and multicolourness of the Dracula-myth, in my dissertation I do not try to give a detailed (fully exhaustive) interpretation of the phenomenon. I rather focus on one small area. I compare Stoker's novel with a particular adaptation of the Dracula movies. It is common in these movies that they all try to reinvent the genre of vampire movies. I analyse their narrative and various cinematographic techniques. These movies were not selected to introduce the last wave of the renewal of the vampire movies, but to show the survival and reinterpretation of particular poetic techniques of Stoker's novel. This is why I have chosen a movie from 2000 (E. Elias Merhige *Shadow of the Vampire*) besides three vampire movies from 2014 ([Jemaine Clement – Taika Waititi, *What We Do in the Shadows*], [Ana Lily Amirpour, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*], [David Rühm, *Der Vampir auf der Couch*]).

This is also the reason why I leave out those contemporary alternative vampire movies which cannot be interpreted as *Dracula*-adaptation, from which the evocation of the Dracula-myth is missing ([Jim Jarmusch, *Only Lovers Left Alive*, 2013], [Derek Lee – Clif Prowse, *Afflicted*, 2013]). I also skipped those movies which evoke the Dracula-myth but do not reflect to *Dracula*'s poetic and narrative techniques (*Dracula Untold*).

Summary of the results

In my analyses I pay particular attention to the vampire metaphor. As in Stoker's novel, in these movies not only the bloodsucking gets metaphorical meaning but also the other attributes of the vampires. For example, in the *Shadow of the Vampire* there is a parallel between the transparency of the vampire's body and the celluloid film strip; in the *Der Vampir auf der Couch* and the *What We Do in the Shadows*, the inability of having a mirror reflection stands parallel with the lack of self-reflection; in the movie *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* the fact that the anonymous vampire girl has a mirror image represents her high self-consciousness. Most of the associations of the vampire metaphors in these movies can already be found in Stoker's novel. In this context, the contemporary vampire movies which reinterpret the narrative and poetic characteristic of *Dracula*, reveal the less disputed topics of the novel. They not only inherit these metaphoric associations but also provide a new framework and a new context for them. By reframing the metaphors, they also reveal a potential new interpretations of them.

In the last one hundred and twenty years, certain potential metaphoric meanings of vampires became more elaborated and approachable than others thanks to the various vampire narratives. Vampires evoke the idea of sexual and economical exploitation before the problems of self-reflexivity and self-representation. However, the immortality of the vampire metaphor heavily lays on these latter associations. The openness of the structure of the vampire metaphor carries the potential to elaborate new layers of meaning. This leads to the continuous renewal of the vampire narratives. The analysed movies – and generally the contemporary alternative vampire movies – exploit this possibility: they develop new associations while they inherit the conventional meanings of the vampire metaphors. The openness of the structure continuously provides vivid interest in the vampire metaphors not only among the laics but among the different devoted professionals from various scientific fields.

The shifts of the portrayal of the vampire in vampire movies can be interpreted not only as a metamorphosis but also as a questioning of previous, dominant perspectives and the ideologies beneath them. In Stoker's novel the discourse is in the hand of the western characters – *Dracula's* narrative is built solely on the notes of westerners. The balance of this overweighting is absolutely missing from the story. Therefore the reader must be cautious and dubious regarding the description of *Dracula* by the western characters. The analysed movies

reflect this asymmetric presentation of Dracula, thus they make the interpreter cautious. This is the reason why I paid special attention to analyse the different viewpoints.

The structure of the thesis

The dissertation contains six chapters. The opening chapter introduces the aims and the subjects of my research and also elaborates and explains the relevant notions. The relation of adaptation and intertextuality, the history of vampire movies and the most popular vampire metaphor (the bloodsucking as sexual act) get special attention.

In this context, the analysed movies are generally not prototypical Dracula-adaptations, they are more devoted to the reinterpretation of the poetic techniques of the novel rather than forming the plot. This goes hand in hand with the counterpointing of the dominant interpretation of vampirism, which regards bloodsucking as a sexual act. The *What We Do in the Shadows* and the *Shadow of the Vampire* focus on two other meanings of the vampire metaphor; the *Der Vampir auf der Couch* parodies the connection between vampirism and sexuality; and the *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* represents sexuality as one potential (but not dominant) association among many others.

Chapter two focuses on the psychoanalytic reading of Stoker's novel in the context of David Rühm's movie. According to the analysis, it is observed that the *Der Vampir auf der Couch* can be considered as a *Dracula* adaptation, not only because it evokes some episodes of the novel and of earlier *Dracula*-adaptations but also because it reflects two significant poetic techniques of the novel: the connection between vampirism and sexuality and the mirror-formation. David Rühm's movie represents the latter not only in the level of the plot but also in meta level. The mirror-formation is reflected in the structure of the narrative: the human characters continuously replay the acts of the vampires and at the end of the movie the vampire identity became an integral part of the human one. The narrative structure of the movie helps to reinterpret the novel and shows that the mirror has not only a significant role in the plot but it is also a basic poetical technique of *Dracula*: the different locations, cultures and characters reflect each other again and again.

Chapter three analyses the *Dracula* and the *Shadow of the Vampire* in relation to modern media. The movie represents the relationship between vampires and modern media in a paradoxical way: on one hand it depicts vampires as atavistic, primitive creatures who can hardly use modern media; on the other hand it shows the vampire-like face of these media. At

the end of the chapter I turn the experiences of the film analyses back to Stoker's novel to show that this paradox can also be found in his writing.

Chapter four focuses on the genre of Stoker's novel besides the vampire metaphors: on the form of epistolary- and diary-novel. The analyses compare these forms with the genre of the *What We Do in the Shadows* (with the found footage films and mockumentaries). In *Dracula*, diaries are not only texts produced in the scope of the narrative but they also function as a mental shelter, a moral obligation and a weapon. The metalepsis as a figure of speech and the act of the self-observation highly correlate with these functions. Reading and writing a diary or a letter helps the western characters to form a mental shelter, which – in between the realm of fiction and reality – protects them against the vampires. The act of self-observation has also a significant role in the fight against the count: with this ability the western characters can distinguish themselves from the vampires and can depict Dracula as the Other, who is unable to observe himself. The *What We Do in the Shadows* inherits mainly this legacy of the novel and reinterprets it with the techniques of found footage films and mockumentaries.

Chapter five compares Stoker's novel with Amirpour's film, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*. Amirpour's movie applies a similar logic as *Der Vampir auf der Couch*. The *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* represents the anonymous protagonist as an opponent of the hierarchical organisation of the diegetical world. The movie uses the same strategy at the level of the vampire metaphors: besides the dominant associations (vampirism as sexuality, vampirism as feminist consciousness) it represents less-conventional ones (vampirism as drug addiction, the vampire mark as tattoo). Amirpour's movie represents these associations in the same level. It does not provide a privilege position to any of them. In this way it forms that critical perspective, from which the allegorical interpretations of the vampire narratives (especially of *Dracula*) can be reconsidered.

Since I summarized the significantly different conclusions of the analyses at the end of every chapter, in the last part of my dissertation I only detail their most relevant connections. Furthermore I focus on those questions in relation to my thesis which can form a basis for future research (for example: the aesthetical quality of vampire movies, the ignorance of *Dracula* in Hungarian literature and cultural studies, the openness of contemporary Hungarian popular culture to the vampire narratives, the role of vampire narratives in the reconstruction of adaptation theories, etc.).

Publications

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