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From undead monster to sexy seducer:
Physical sex appeal in contemporary Dracula films

Donald Rottenbucher

Numerous versions of Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula* have been produced for cinema. For decades, Count Dracula was first the suave Bela Legosi and then the athletically menacing Christopher Lee. Recently there has been a resurgence of Dracula in cinema, accompanied by a dramatic shift away from the monstrous and towards the sexually desirable. The 1992 block-buster *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, was at the apex of such a portrayal. Furthermore, its influence can be seen in other films in the past ten years, notably *Dracula 2000*, *Dracula Rising*, and *Dark Prince: The True Story of Dracula*. Though these four films differ significantly from one another, all present Draculas who are sleek men with chiseled physiques who seduce women by their looks, not their supernatual powers.

This revision of Dracula as a romantic monster, of course, predates the Coppola film. It is most marked in the 1979 *Dracula*, which borrowed heavily from the stage play by Hamilton Deane and John L. Balderston, enhancing the seductive nature of the Count through the selection of Frank Langella for the title role. Langella oozes sex appeal. Instead of using horror to intimidate his victims, this Dracula seduces them with sensuality (Melton 211). Here we have a vampire who falls in love twice and experiences emotional turmoil; a vulnerable vampire who is a victim as much as a victimizer (Holte 81). Here we find a distinct movement away from the monstrous aspect of the character that dominated the gore-laden Hammer films of the late 1950s to mid 1970s. Although Christopher Lee’s Dracula was sexually menacing, his Dracula was more to be feared than desired, more of a monster than a lover.

Later, Coppola creates an even more sympathetic character for his 1992 feature film. Instead of a monster preying on women, Dracula becomes a tragic figure searching for his long lost love. Even though he retains some gothic elements (and even gore, presumably to keep the horror fans happy), this vision of Dracula is essentially one of a tortured soul capable of redemption. The more recent Dracula films tend to keep the romantic themes as the main focus points for their narratives and have increased the physical and sexual appeal of Dracula.

It is worth examining the physical representations of Count Dracula in these films to note the extent to which they adhere to or depart from Stoker’s original concept. First of all, Stoker’s most detailed description of Dracula comes from Jonathan Harker, who records this in his journal:

His face was a strong, a very strong, aquiline, with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils, with lofty domed forehead, and hair growing scantily round the temples but profusely elsewhere. His eyebrows were very massive, almost meeting over the nose, and with bushy hair that seemed to curl in its own profusion. The mouth, so far as I could see it under the heavy moustache, was fixed and rather cruel-looking, with peculiarly sharp white teeth. These protruded over the lips, whose remarkable ruddiness showed astonishing vitality in a man of his years. For the rest, his ears were pale, and at the tops extremely pointed. The chin was broad and strong, and the cheeks firm though thin. The general effect was one of extraordinary pallor. (Stoker 25)

Elsewhere we are told that the Count is tall and thin; he has red eyes, sharp teeth, long and sharp fingernails, and broad coarse hands with squat fingers, with hairs in the center of his palms. He is frequently associated with foul odors, as when Jonathan notes that his breath was rank.”As he lay in his great box, he is compared to a “filthy leech” (67). In her account of Dracula’s attack on her during which he forced her to drink his blood, Mina refers specifically to his “reeking lips” and his “foul, awful, sneering mouth” (343). This hardly fits what one would expect of a romantic seducer. When he is rejuvenated with fresh blood, his appearance is no less repulsive:
A tall, thin man, with a beaky nose and black moustache and pointed beard, who was also observing the pretty girl… His face was not a good face. It was hard, and cruel, and sensual, and his big white teeth, that looked all the whiter because his lips were so red, were pointed like an animal’s. (215)

Even here he is still is not an attractive character.

Of the four films under discussion, Only Bram Stoker’s Dracula makes any attempt to stay true to this physical description. But the resemblance is limited. It includes, for example, the long fingernails and hairy palms, generally excluded from earlier Dracula films (with the notable exception of Nosferatu). While the Gary Oldman portrayal does retain some of the grotesque aspects of Stoker’s Count, these are limited to the “older” Dracula in the early stages of the film. Once the youthful Dracula takes center stage, there is a dramatic change. The younger version, the one that Mina falls in love with, is suave and seductive and bears hardly any resemblance to Stoker’s character. Dracula, rejuvenated by drinking blood, is a handsome Prince Vlad rather than a gruesome vampire (Holte xvii).

The other three films owe practically nothing to Stoker’s description; their Draculas are sleek and sexy, and have hardly any of the physical monstrosity that is so central to the novel. Dracula is both dark and mysteriously handsome, a stunning model fit for pages of fashion magazines. Dracula 2000 freely adapts characters from the Stoker novel. Dracula has a muscular physique even when withered and bloodless. Producer Wes Craven states in the documentary about the making of the film that, “[Dracula] is dark and handsome and dangerous; what more can you ask from a leading man,” while actor Danny Masterson refers to this Dracula as “a pimp” (“Behind the Scenes”). Gerald Butler, who plays Dracula, uses his sex appeal and polished physique rather than supernatural charisma to charm women. Although the director and writer go to great lengths in the DVD commentary to claim that Butler used Dracula’s charisma to prey on women, the acting in the film shows otherwise. This Dracula is a wanton sexual creature who actually turns out to be Judas Iscariot, still alive and hating all things Christian. This connection, though rather farfetched, does inject originality into what has become standard Dracula fare.

The two other films, Dracula Rising and Dark Prince, are about Vlad Dracula rather than Count Dracula. These reflect an interest in the historical Dracula that dates back to the books of Radu Florescu and Raymond McNally in the 1970s. The characters in these two films are influenced much more by these texts than by Stoker’s (Melton 65). In Stoker, the link is tenuous, to a “voivode Dracula” referred to by Van Helsing but with little to indicate that Stoker knew very much about the historical figure. In these two films, Vlad is, not surprisingly, physically appealing.

The Roger Corman production, Dracula Rising, is clearly a film made to cash in on the success of Bram Stoker’s Dracula, which grossly overstates the connection between Stoker’s Count and the historical Vlad. In Dracula Rising, Vlad, as a vampire, happens to stumble upon his long-lost love in current times. In the 1400s, Vlad, now portrayed as a monk in an archaic monastery, witnessed his love burned at the stake after she was caught fornicating with him. The plot deals with his ability to refrain from vampirizing his new love and to defeat his doppelganger and vampiric brother, Alec.

While Vlad and his reincarnated love, Theresa, are drawn together by dreams of déjà vu, Vlad is simply a strapping ageless lad. The dreams are used as a way of explaining their mutual feelings, but the acting proves otherwise. Theresa is drawn to Vlad by his sexual abilities and his protecting her from Alec. Even though Vlad lacks charisma, he does have extraordinary powers. During the final showdown, Vlad and Alec demonstrate their vampire powers by throwing lightning bolts at each other. Once again, in Dracula Rising, Vlad is not appealing to anyone but the female character in the film. Nor is this version of Dracula even remotely terrifying. In fact, Vlad is a sympathetic vampire while his brother is a lustful, evil vampire. Supposedly Vlad is a tragic figure, oppressed by religion and his horrible father Vlad Dracul. Alec acts as the other half of the vampire mythos; he is evil, brooding, and hateful.

Dark Prince does not even deal with vampirism. Instead, it follows the human Vlad Dracula, his rise as a ruler and how the vampire myth became attached to him. Vlad has no supernatural powers. Once again actor Rudolf Martin is another handsome man who does not enthral women. Instead he is
monogamous with his wife Lidia (an entirely fictitious creation). Dark Prince features a swashbuckling Vlad the Impaler. Impressive sword fighting scenes are intermixed with ramblings about Vlad keeping his land free of the Turks and an ongoing quarrel with his brother Radu. This film gives some background information on the life of Vlad the Impaler but offers nothing on the literary Dracula. Rather it is an adventure movie about a Romanian prince with a sinister side.

These new Dracula films are all major departures from Stoker’s novel. In the case of the three – Dracula 2000, Dracula Rising, and Dark Prince – this is not really an issue as they do not credit Stoker as the source for their screen plays. It is safe to say that both Dracula Rising and Dark Prince were trying to appeal to vampire film fans by using the name of the archetypal vampire appearing in their titles. On the other hand, Bram Stoker’s Dracula claims to be “faithful” to Stoker’s novel, in spite of its major departures. Its integration of some of the history of Vlad the Impaler into the storyline from Stoker’s novel ensured the film a wider audience. All four films exude more sexuality than horror, offering Draculas that are more seductive than repulsive, more victims than victimizers. The character Lucy in Dracula 2000 claims that Dracula (like sex) is “better than chocolate.”

Dracula for the new millennium has taken on a new form. No longer just a monster, he has become a sex symbol. Critics claim that Dracula’s bite and indeed Dracula himself are metaphors for sexual liberation. Films like Interview with the Vampire and Bram Stoker’s Dracula feed into this appeal by casting attractive and appealing actors in the roles of vampires. B-films like Razor Blade Smile or the later Witchcraft sequels feature female vampires that are more akin to strippers than the ghastly undead. They rely on nudity and soft-core sex scenes to attract an audience. This is what seems to be featured in the new wave of Dracula films: sexy Counts with long hair and provocative accents.

Sex, of course, is what sells.

Works Cited