

## HORROR AND HUMOUR IN VAMPIRE ORIENTED CINEMA

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### **Abstract: Horror and Humour in Vampire Oriented Cinema**

Vampires have been present in cinema from the very beginning of filmography. The first screen representation of a vampire can be traced back to the 1896 French short, *The Devil's Castle*, directed by Georges Méliès. The silent era brought more vampire films, many of which have only survived in the form of notes, posters and newspaper print, with the originals lost or destroyed in the upheaval of time and history. However, such early horror classics as Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922), or the reconstructed lost treasure, *London After Midnight* by Tod Browning (1927), allow us to form a picture of the early celluloid imaginings of the vampire. Sound cinema equipped vampires with a voice, allowing for a process of transformation from fundamentally demonic figures into far more complex beings. The 1931 film, *Dracula*, directed by Browning, presents a vampire who is no longer merely a creepy, bloodthirsty demon like his German predecessor, *Nosferatu*. Rather, Browning's *Dracula* is an intelligent and knowledgeable creature, far removed from popular folk visions of demons. Further evolution of the vampire figure in cinema includes the acquisition of strictly human emotions as well the recognition of moral rules and values, thus altering the hitherto nature of the vampire character as well as the overall characteristics of the cinematic vampire. Riding the popular tide of immense interest in the supernatural and inexplicable, vampire cinema - suddenly free from the shackles of its previously defined genre, continues to develop and thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This article focuses on the curious physical and axiological evolution of a cinematic vampire, and discusses the ways of depicting horror and humour in vampire oriented cinema.

**Keywords:** Vampire, Horror, Horror Cinema, Humour, Comedy

### **Abstrakt: Horror i humor w kinie wampirystycznym**

Postać wampira pojawiła się w kinie na samym początku istnienia medium. Za pierwszy wampirystyczny obraz filmowy uznaje się *Rezydencję diabła* z 1896 roku w reżyserii Georgesa Mélièsa. W epoce niemego kina temat wampira powracał na ekran wielokrotnie. Wiele z wczesnych obrazów przetrwało jedynie w formie plakatów i wycinków z gazet, a oryginały zaginęły podczas wojny. Jednakże wczesne produkcje filmowe, takie jak *Nosferatu – symfonia grozy* (1922) Friedricha Wilhelma Murnaua, czy zrekonstruowany *London po północy* (1927) Toda Browniga, pozwalają na odtworzenie

wczesnych kinowych wizji wampira. Kino dźwiękowe pozwoliło wampirowi przemówić, a to rozpoczęło proces transformacji z postaci fundamentalnie demonicznej w postać bardziej złożoną. Pierwsza dźwiękowa ekranizacja powieści Brama Stokera pt. *Dracula* (reż. Tod Browning, 1931) ukazuje wampira, który nie jest jedynie żądnym krwi potworem, jak jego poprzednik Nosferatu. Browningowski Dracula jest inteligentny i wykształcony i znacznie różni się od ludowych wyobrażeń demona. Dalsza ewolucja wampira uczłowiecza go: wyposaża w ludzkie uczucia i zasady moralne. Zmienia się więc natura wampira oraz jego kinowy wizerunek. Ten niezwykle popularny w pierwszym stuleciu kina temat, wyzwolony z okowów przestarzałych zasad, znajduje zwolenników w kinie nowego milenium. W niniejszym artykule omówiony zostaje temat fizycznej i aksjologicznej przemiany wampira oraz sposoby ukazania horroru i humoru w kinie wampirystycznym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wampir, horror, horror kinowy, humor, komedia

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**V**ampires have been present in cinema from the very beginning of filmography. The first screen representation of a vampire can be traced back to the 1896 French short, *The Devil's Castle*, directed by Georges Méliès. The silent era brought more vampire films, many of which have only survived in the form of notes, posters and newspaper print, with the originals lost or destroyed in the upheaval of time and history. However, such early horror classics as Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922), or the reconstructed lost treasure, *London After Midnight* by Tod Browning (1927), allow us to form a picture of the early celluloid imaginings of the vampire. Sound cinema equipped vampires with a voice, allowing for a process of transformation from fundamentally demonic figures into far more complex beings. The 1931 film, *Dracula*, directed by Browning, presents a vampire who is no longer merely a creepy, bloodthirsty demon like his German predecessor, Nosferatu. Rather, Browning's Dracula is an intelligent and knowledgeable creature, far removed from popular folk visions of demons. Further evolution of the vampire figure in cinema includes the acquisition of strictly human emotions as well the recognition of moral rules and values, thus altering the hitherto nature of the vampire character as well as the overall characteristics of the cinematic vampire. Riding the popular tide of immense interest in the supernatural and inexplicable, vampire cinema - suddenly free from the shackles of its previously defined genre, continues to develop and thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This article focuses on the curious physical and axiological evolution of a cinematic vampire, and discusses the ways of depicting horror and humour in vampire oriented cinema.

### Horror. “Enter Freely and of Your Own Will”<sup>1</sup>

Vampire themes have been present in culture for centuries. The images of blood-sucking demons can be found in folk legends, paintings, literature, music and other forms of conveying human emotions and fears. Cinema has not been an exception. From the moment of the new medium’s conception in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, vampires have found their way onto the silver screen. The aforementioned Méliès' vision presented in *The Devil's Castle*, offers an image of Mephistopheles transforming from a bat into Satan himself, thus introducing a cinematic vision which will later serve as a canon of the vampire on-screen imagery. In his 1915 movie *A Fool There Was*, Frank Powell used the term 'vampire' in reference to a seductive woman who threatened the sanctity of marriage and morality. The film, starring Theda Bara, popularised the term 'vamp', which from then became synonymous with a femme fatale. The pre-*Nosferatu* vampire films strongly support the thesis of the filmmakers' interest in the subject. It is, however, Murnau's 1922 German Expressionist classic that is remembered as the first significant example of the vampire cinema.

Murnau's *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* is the first full length adaptation of the late Victorian novel *Dracula* (1897) by the Irish writer Bram Stoker. The book, although by no means the first literary vampire story, quickly gained recognition among the readers and critics and is now considered the definitive example of Gothic vampire fiction. Stoker sets his story in the Carpathian Mountains, where a young British solicitor, Jonathan Harker, is sent to finalise a business deal with the Transylvanian count Dracula. Murnau's failure to obtain copyrights from Bram Stoker's widow, resulted in having to change both setting and character names, threatening the release of the first cinematic version as a consequence. However, the movie eventually premiered in 1922 in Berlin, and became a veritable pearl of the silent era. Interestingly, in 1995, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of cinema, the Vatican compiled a list of '45 Great Films', in which *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* was awarded a place within the Art category.<sup>2</sup>

*Nosferatu* introduces a model of a vampire figure that will be quoted and referred to in numerous future productions. The film loosely follows the plot of *Dracula*. A young lawyer, Thomas Hutter (Gustav von Wangenheim) is sent to Transylvania to do business with a new client, Count Orlok (Max Schreck), leaving behind his wife, Ellen (Greta Schröder). Hutter reaches the decrepit Transylvanian castle, where he meets the demonic Count, and quickly learns the truth about his vampiric nature. The Count is getting

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<sup>1</sup> B. Stoker, *Dracula*, Vintage Classics, London 2016, p. 17. First published by Archibald Constable and Company, London 1897.

<sup>2</sup> The Vatican list of 45 “great films” was issued in 1995 to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the cinema. The list consists of 3 categories: religion, values, and art. The list can be viewed at: <http://archive.usccb.org/movies/vaticanfilms.shtml> (13.11.23017).

readying himself for a sea voyage to a newly purchased estate in Hutter's hometown. Meanwhile, back at home, Ellen is experiencing a trance-like telepathic connection that endow her with visions of Orlok's activities and of her husband in grave peril.

The vampire reaches the shore before Hutter, and with him he brings “plague” and death. The town soon turns into a contaminated ghetto, with victims falling to the strange disease. Having realised the reason for the town’s misfortune, Ellen decides to take matters into her own hands. She invites the bloodsucking Count into her room whereupon she sacrifices her blood, and later her life. The entranced vampire forgets about the passing of time and the sun rising at dawn makes him vanish in a puff of smoke. The Hutters share the last moment together, and the final scene reveals the ruins of the Count's Transylvanian castle, symbolising the end of the era of terror.

Nosferatu, as interpreted by the actor Max Schreck, continues to frighten the viewers on more than one level. Visually, Orlok is a terrifying, bald dried-out mummy-like character with long claws and sharp, pointed teeth, a deformed rat-like face, crooked nose and hollow, emotionless eyes. Complemented with an aesthetic setting typical of the German Expressionist movement – the rough, cubist shapes of interiors, unquiet visions of violent forces of nature, dark disconcerting shades, chiaroscuro effects. Filled with psychedelic music and devoid of spoken word, the artistic sphere of *Nosferatu* is enough to scare alone. This archaic form of story-weaving, together together with a sense of otherness increased by the make up and fashion popular in the silent era, creates the hair-rising impression of unearthliness even in the case of human characters such as Ellen Hutter and Knock (Alexander Granach).

Similar effects can be attributed to aforementioned Theda Bara in the role of the human vampire in *A Fool There Was*. Here, the appearance of Nosferatu out of necessity had to be even worse, more abstract, evoking disgust, revulsion and fear of the unknown and the inexplicable. Therefore, the next level of inducing dread in Murnau's film plays on the viewers' subconscious fear of the supernatural as well as their morbid desire to experience horror.<sup>3</sup>

The search for an accurate and full definition of horror in cinema has been a continuing concern of scholars and philosophers. Similarly, the question of why we enjoy watching horrors remains open for further discussion. Throughout the years, numerous theories have been formulated providing some plausible answers to the questions at

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<sup>3</sup> The nature of fear, terror and horror was discussed in my article: *What We Fear and What We Desire: The Nature of Fear and Terror in Vampire Oriented Cinema* [in:] *Facing Our Darkness: Manifestations of Fear, Horror and Terror*, L. Colmenero-Chilberg and F. Mújdricza (ed.), Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxford 2015, pp. 3-10.

hand. According to the philosopher Noël Carroll, we fear monsters and supernatural creatures because they cannot be accounted for by science. The presence of a monster, Carroll posits, is the main determinant of the genre of horror.<sup>4</sup> So the natural question would be why fictional characters are capable of evoking fear, even when experienced on screen in the comfort of one's own lounge or in the safety of a cinema? This puzzle has been named "the paradox of fiction" and, in short, can be explained by the emotional and biological responses of a human body to a scary situation, real and fictional alike.<sup>5</sup> It is, in fact, our conscious knowledge of the fictionality of the threat that allows us to enjoy watching horror movies. Other explanations include Sigmund's Freud's theory of the 'uncanny'. Psychoanalytical theorists claim that "horror monsters can be seen as metaphorical examples of repressed beliefs and desires".<sup>6</sup> A very convincing view upon the matter is the theory presented by Aaron Smuts, who recalls the following opinion of H.P. Lovecraft followed by his own interpretation of the matter: "People enjoy horror, roughly because it allows them to combat scientific materialism and to engage in feelings of cosmic awe. One could construct a Lovecraft-inspired resolution, to the paradox as follows: horror provides something of a religious experience that helps alleviate the deadening effects of living in a scientific culture. The feeling of awe compensates for whatever negative reactions one might experience while fearing the unknown."<sup>7</sup>

Murnau's *Nosferatu* seems to be a perfect example to support the above theory; a physically disgusting and profoundly inhuman monster whose actions are driven by beastly, predatory instincts alone, such that the emotions evoked are those of dread and fear, and reinforced by an almost tangible sense of reptilian body texture and the choking stench of carrion. Such a powerful and disturbing image of the supernatural evil incarnate has kept audiences in awe for almost a century and has become a model and a quintessential pattern of reference for numerous directors of vampire films.

The character of Count Orlok has been frequently interpreted in socio-political contexts. Appearing in Germany shortly after the fiasco of World War I, he is thought to symbolise the country's insecurity and uncertainty about the future. Others tend to read the character as a metaphor for the rising power of Adolf Hitler and a prophecy of the forthcoming terror of international war.<sup>8</sup> What these interpretations have in common is

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<sup>4</sup> N. Carroll, *Horror and Humor* [in:] "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, vol. 57, No. 2, "Aesthetics and Popular Culture", Spring 1999, p. 147-148.

<sup>5</sup> A. Smuts, *Horror* [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, P. Livingston and C. Plantinga (ed.), Routledge, New York 2009, p. 507.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 508.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 513.

<sup>8</sup> See: S. Kracauer, *Od Caligariego do Hitlera. Z psychologii filmu niemieckiego, słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2009.

the sense of dread and human insignificance in the face of unearthly and almost indestructible evil. In light of this, the fear of Nosferatu appears almost rational, and his vampire character takes on a whole new symbolic meaning giving 'wings' to convey ideas and social criticism.

The introduction of sound in 1927 revolutionised the cinema and cinematography industry, and bringing an end to many common forms of artistic expression. With the addition of the spoken word to celluloid recordings resulting from the successful synchronisation of vision and sound, the pompous, exaggerated gestures and over-dramatic make up of yesteryear were soon gone. A new era had begun for cinema. Numerous actors lost their jobs due to either having a strong accent, an imperfectly pitched voice or bad diction.<sup>9</sup> Curiously, Hollywood quickly recognised the benefits of foreign accents in genres like science fiction or horror. Combined with visual manipulation, a foreign accent could easily convey the atmosphere of difference or otherness and alleviate the danger of any "the boy-next-door" effects in characters who were supposed to represent distant cultures or otherworldliness.

Such was the case of the first Hollywood version of *Dracula* directed by Tod Browning in 1931. Born in Romania, Hungarian actor, Bela Lugosi, who at that time allegedly did not speak a word of English<sup>10</sup>, was chosen for the role of the mysterious vampire Count after an appearance in the Broadway stage adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel in 1927. Lugosi's rendition of Count Dracula holds its rightful honorary place in the pantheon of the greatest and most memorable horror protagonists. Along with the canonical long black robe with blood red lining, pale handsome face and lustrous eyes, his foreign accent is perhaps one of the most recognisable and most frequently cited features of *Dracula* and cinematic vampires in general.

The use of spoken words in horror called for some new ways to frighten the viewer. Stoker's *Dracula*, was by nature a talkative creature, delighting in history, geography and languages and displaying a vast knowledge of contemporary affairs, *savoir vivre* and a hunger for further learning.<sup>11</sup> Such features in a demon might turn out problematic whilst trying to create a plausible on-screen vampire who would still have the power to scare and frighten. Not an easy task, when the monster is a chatty type and, in opposition to Murnau's *Nosferatu*, displays a healthy interest in everyday human habits. Luckily for the

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<sup>9</sup> I. Syska, *Przełom dźwiękowy* [in:] *Kino Klasyczne*, T. Lubelski, Iwona Sowińska, R.Syska (ed.), Universitas, Kraków 2012, pp. 19-71.

<sup>10</sup> See: A. Gemra, *Od gotycyzmu do horroru. Wilkołak, wampir i Monstrum Frankensteina w wybranych utworach*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2008, p. 209.

<sup>11</sup> See: B. Stoker, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-29.

directors, who chose to stay relatively faithful to Stoker's literary model, with all his good manners and cultured behaviour, Dracula retains a ruthless demonic character. His actions are selfish, instinct-driven and humanly immoral. As John Draeger states, "throughout the novel, he seems more interested in satisfying his own desires than worrying about the value of a human life".<sup>12</sup> He kills his victims for food cold-bloodedly and mercilessly, thus leaving not much space for sympathy or compassion. Browning succeeded in depicting Stoker's intended dichotomy in the vampire's character. Count Dracula fascinates with his scholarly conduct, charms with the demonic power of mesmerism, and frightens with his ruthlessness and inhumanity. The feeling of awe in the face of the 'uncanny' is intensified by his elegant foreign accent (proving his otherness) and the Gothic setting and atmosphere of the film.

To achieve the effect of gloom and ominous terror, German Expressionists used chiaroscuro and lighting. Later generations of horror-cinema directors frequently refer to the Gothic tradition in creating the intended atmosphere. More specifically, the style, in fact, became a trademark of horror and monster cinema, rooted in the literary tradition of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and other masterpieces of Gothic literature, including (missing??) (1794), Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), works of Edgar Allan Poe, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871) and Stoker's *Dracula*, early sound horrors undertook the Gothic aesthetics. As in literature, Gothic movies followed the genre template established in Walpole's novel. Gothic terror and horror derived from romantic pleasures and encounters with the supernatural. Other compulsory elements included specific settings, like old castles, an atmosphere of mystery and suspense, inexplicable signs and events, the ubiquitous heroine in distress, the impossible romance, unfulfilled love affairs, as well as metonymies of gloom and diabolic imagery and vocabulary.<sup>13</sup>

The 1931 adaptation of *Dracula* consolidates the classical Gothic iconography as well as many of the elements and themes which will frequently recur in later vampire scripts. These include images of a decrepit castle, where Dracula resides together with his three vampire wives, coffin-beds, bats, wolves, rats, spiders, cobwebs, dark shades, wild nature – all symbols of the night, darkness and the demonic. Following on from the novel, the film depicts motifs of madness, unearthly desire, temptation, unexplainable power, fascination with blood and the mood of veritable horror. Women in distress are also present – the two main heroines, Lucy (Frances Dade) and Mina (Helen Chandler) fall

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<sup>12</sup> J. Draeger, *Should Vampires Be Held Accountable for Their Bloodthirsty Behavior?* [in:] *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy. New Life for the Undead*, R. Greene and K. Silem Mohammad (ed.), Carus Publishing Company, Chicago & LA Salle, II 2010, p. 121.

<sup>13</sup> M. E. Snodgrass, *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature*, Facts on File, New York 2005, 152-154.

under the vampiric spell of the Count and, even though Mina's life is eventually saved, both pay a severe price for the trance-like encounter with the bloodsucking demon.

With various changes to the plot, many of the later adaptations of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* maintain their Gothic imagery. Among them, one of the most popular is the 1992 film by Francis Ford Coppola. In this production, Count Dracula (Gary Oldman) is a more complex character equipped with a melancholic back story of a romantic nature, combined with the usual demonic features. The viewer becomes a witness to the dramatic circumstances of the tragic suicidal death of his beloved wife, which resulted in the Count's profound despair followed by his renouncement of God and subsequent transformation from a human to a demon. Throughout the film *Dracula* displays a mixture of human and vampire instincts, feelings and actions, which in turn makes him a complex and morally ambiguous character, escaping easy and straightforward assessment. Nevertheless, as a vampire he remains terrifying as a supernatural unearthly and demonic figure, which evokes fear and awe bigger than the sparkle of compassion and regret that might have been begotten in the course of the story.

The genre of horror proves to be as magnetic and mesmerising as vampires themselves. Stokers original line, quoted in most of the adaptations of *Dracula*, serves as an interesting commentary to the phenomenon of the curious attraction of the cinematic horror: "Enter freely and of your own will"<sup>14</sup> This warning is uttered or displayed plainly and openly. Yet, similar to the characters in the literary and filmic diegesis, the viewers grant a conscious consent to being scared and frightened freely within the confines of the cinema. Eagerly do we anticipate being transferred into the fictional land of the undead, the supernatural and the uncanny with all the awareness of the awaiting dread and horror that the genre promises.

### **Humour. "Pardon Me, But Your Teeth Are in My Neck"**<sup>15</sup>

At first glance, the connection between the genres of horror and comedy can be as perplexing as the relation between horror and humour. Nevertheless, following the reflection of Noël Carroll, "[although] being horrified seems as though it should preclude amusement [...], there is some intimate relation of affinity between horror and humor."<sup>16</sup> The above statement is doubly supported: firstly by Francis Hutcheson's 18<sup>th</sup> century Incongruity Theory of Humour stating that "an essential ingredient of comic amusement

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<sup>14</sup> B. Stoker, *op. cit.*, p.17.

<sup>15</sup> The phrase served as a sub-title for Roman Polański's 1967 film *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (American version of the title). The film was released in the UK under the title *Dance of the Vampires*.

<sup>16</sup> N. Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 145-146.

is the juxtaposition of incongruous or contrasting objects, events, categories, propositions, maxims, properties, and so on.”<sup>17</sup> Secondly, the clear dividing line between horror and comedy can be distorted by means of obscuring the element of fearsomeness in the horror genre. Thus, if, as stated earlier, the defining element of the horror genre is the presence of a fearful and loathsome monster, for the sake of evoking laughter, the monster must be deprived of his fearful properties. In other words, horror can turn into comedy or farce when the nature of terror is disturbed in such a way that it results in an amusing effect. “The boundary line between horror and incongruity humour is drawn in terms of fear,” Carroll argues. “Horror equals categorical transgression or jamming plus fear; incongruity humour equals, in part, categorical transgression or jamming minus fear.”<sup>18</sup>

Such must be the state of affairs in the case of vampire comedies. The first parodies of the filmic horror genre followed the wave of success of the monster films of the pre-war sound and picture era, and immediately aimed at deconstructing the ethos of terror and dread. Films like Charles Barton's and Charles Lamont series featuring Abbot and Costello and their comic encounters with the classic Universal monsters<sup>19</sup> directly contributed to establishing the new hybrid genre eventually dubbed as comedy-horror. The films from this category toy with tradition and horror convention by means of laughter-evoking tricks aiming at the familiarising and ridiculing of well-known and once-fearsome characters. In the process, figures like Dracula, Wolf Man and Frankenstein's Monster were pronounced clichés, becoming objects for the viewers' amusement. Combining humour with horror proved to be a successful and triumphant venture, evoking a desire for new doses of the interwoven scare and fun in audiences.

Roman Polański's *The Fearless Vampire Killers, or Pardon Me, But Your Teeth Are in My Neck* (1967) is now viewed as a seminal example of comedy-horror. Following the pattern demarcated by Bram Stoker, the film presents two vampire hunters, Professor Abronsius (Jack MacGowran) and his apprentice Alfred (Roman Polański), on a quest to prove the existence of vampires in the Eastern European mountains. The course of action brings them to a little village near the old castle, which, as they rightly suspect, is a vampire dwelling. The angst-ridden villagers refuse any mention of the castle or vampires, but instead perform a series of rituals designed to keep evil at bay; including huge amounts of garlic placed for safety in every conceivable corner. The travellers' suspicions are confirmed by the reaction of a village fool, who hastily gets silenced by other guests

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

<sup>19</sup> The series include, among others, the films like: *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948), *Abbott and Costello Meet the Killer, Boris Karloff* (1949), *Abbott and Costello Meet the Invisible Man* (1951), and *Abbott and Costello Meet Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1953).

of the inn, run by local Jew, Yoine Shagal (Alfie Bass). Sooner than predicted, Professor Abronsius and Albert are forced to face the master of the nearby castle, a vampire Count von Krolock (Ferdy Mayne) in an attempt to save Shagal's kidnapped daughter Sarah (Sharon Tate). This heroic venture is taken upon by the young, love-stricken Alfred, while the Professor's reason for visiting the castle is purely educational. The plot of the film includes unexpected turns of events like changing Shagal into a vampire as well as a series of improbable comic sequences such as chases and futile attempts of escape.

From the very first minute, Polański plays with the horror tradition, beginning with the misleading eerie music by Krzysztof Komeda, as well as purely Stoker-like Gothic scenery typical of the classic horror convention. In James Morrison's words: "the beautifully designed sets [of the film] mimic a kaleidoscopic fantasia of an Eastern Europe of the mind, but they are so eccentrically stylized as to suggest that the weird, moonstruck geographies they represent are lost to history – if they ever existed – and can be accessed only through myth and imagination."<sup>20</sup> And truly, from the start of the movie, the mise en scène and the whole of the filmic diegesis maintains a dream-like quality.

The opening image offers a horse-driven cart taking the travellers through the wintry rural countryside, exposing them to all the dangers of the wild and uncivilised eastern world. The moon-lit landscape is complemented by the plaintive howls of wild beasts – the "children of the night."<sup>21</sup> As if on cue, the hungry animals appear in the form of wolf-like dogs trying to attack and devour Alfred and the Professor. The Professor appears frozen stiff. Hence, the boy is left to deal with the predicament on his own, practically bare-handedly. Nevertheless, even in this first scene of the movie, it is instantly clear that the two characters are far from being the heroes in the classic meaning of the term. Professor Abronsius, called by his university colleagues "The Nut", is the equivalent of the 'mad' scientist. Again, even though another determinant of the Gothic genre is maintained, Abronsius resembles doctor Frankenstein or Professor Van Helsing only by profession. Tall and lanky, with dishevel clothing and an Albert Einstein hairstyle, the Professor recalls wacky characters from 1930s screwball comedies. The comic effect is increased by the figure of his bumbling sidekick, Alfred, with the countenance of a half-wit. Altogether, this picture belies against any possible imaginings of chivalry and heroism.

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<sup>20</sup> J. Morrison quoted in T. Prasch, *Oy, Have You Got the Wrong Vampire. Dislocation, Comic Distancing, and Political Critique in Roman Polański's The Fearless Vampire Killers* [in:] *The Laughing Dead. The Horror-Comedy Film from Bride of Frankenstein to Zombieland*, C. J. Miller, A. Bowdoin Van Riper (ed.), Rowman & Littlefield, London 20016, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> B. Stoker, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

Other characters in the movie are similarly exaggerated and grotesque. The innkeeper, Mr. Shagal, is cast in the image of a stereotypical vaudeville Jew, both in appearance and conduct. After having been transformed into a vampire, he is refused admission to the crypt of the vampire Count (here Polański mocks racial prejudice). The newly 'undead' Shagal is not afraid of the cross, announcing with amusement: "You've got the wrong vampire!" Opposite Shagal is his obese and squeaky wife Rebecca (Jessie Robins) – another stereotypical incarnate, together with two 'vamps', Sarah Shagal and Magda the maid (Fiona Lewis). Both women emanate hyper-sexuality and stand in direct contrast to the males around them. Different is the world of the supernatural. Count von Krolock's (Ferdy Mayne) resemblance to Christopher Lee's Dracula<sup>22</sup> is uncanny. The ancient vampire in his Gothic castle radiates aristocratic breeding and a "no-nonsense" attitude. The Count, however, fails to genuinely terrify upon the realisation that, in fact, he is a Frankenstein-like creature – a patchwork made of the Hammer Horror visuals, Bela Lugosi's outfit and Murnau's *Nosferatu*'s name (as Łucja Demby notices, Krolock is after all not that far from Orlok<sup>23</sup>). The figure of the Count therefore pays tribute to old vampire classics. In contrast, another vampire figure, the Count's homosexual son Herbert von Krolock (Iain Quarrier), decidedly transgresses the norms. Although the vampire fiction convention since Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's novel *Carmilla* (1872) accepts or even encourages the existence of lesbian vampires, homosexual male vampires are not so common to the genre. The picture is complete with the Krolocks' hunchback servant, Koukol (Terry Downes). Based on the popular stock character of Igor, an assistant to numerous Gothic villains<sup>24</sup>, Polański's Koukol constitutes the quintessential horror monster with additional shape-shifting skills.

Other sources of humour in *The Fearless Vampire Killers* stem from silent slapstick tradition. Visual gags like Alfred's attempt to escape from the over-effusive vampiric love attentions of Herbert would make Charlie Chaplin proud. The scene, alongside numerous clumsy slips, getting hit on the head with sticks, bags or buckets, etc., is proof of the longevity of good old visual comedy and the human propensity to laugh at the ridiculous. There are more examples of slapstick in the film. The visions of half frozen people or Professor Abronsius stuck in the castle window with only his legs dangling outside, or Albert's futile attempts to stake the Count through the heart whilst sleeping in his coffin, and above all the sequence of the vampire ball. The ball scene is preceded by more Gothic imagery of the vampire community waking up from their graves for a once-in-a-year

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<sup>22</sup> Christopher Lee starred as Count Dracula in the Hammer Horror Dracula series between 1958-1973, including *Dracula/Horror of Dracula* (1958).

<sup>23</sup> Ł. Demby in an introduction to the Polish edition of the *Fearless Vampire Killers* DVD release in 2006.

<sup>24</sup> The character of a hunchback assistant of a "mad scientist" first appeared in the 1931 version of *Frankenstein* directed by James Whale, and was later popularised by other Universal horror productions.

celebration, combined with the feasting upon humans delivered to them by the Count. This year's prize is Sarah followed by the two "heroes". Alfred and Abronsius succeed in escaping their prison cell and are determined to save Sarah. To this end, they attend the ball wearing the required 18<sup>th</sup> century costumes. The scene is shot with a tinted glass effect and sepia colours, the cobwebs all around and the overall ambience of otherworldliness adding to the atmosphere of archaism. The ensuing ghastly dance serves as a tool for passing information between the two warriors. Soon the presence of the undercover humans is unveiled, when in the vast crowd of guests their reflections are the only ones showing in the huge mirror. Despite the discovery, the characters manage to flee from the castle together with an entranced Sarah. The final scene presents the Professor, Alfred and Sarah in a sleigh. What the men do not suspect is that it is too late for Sarah. The romantic happy ending undergoes a last-minute reversal as Alfred is bit by Sarah, who turns out to have been freshly transformed into a vampire. Unaware of the turn of the events, the Professor drives away carrying evil into the outside world.

According to Christopher Standford, *Fearless Vampire Killers* is the "greatest-hits collection of Polański's themes. There is violence, nudity, a touch of both homosexuality and sadomasochism, [...] darker corners of the human psyche, and of course voyeurism."<sup>25</sup> All these elements combined with a healthy dose of humour and hilarity stemming from incongruities and parodistic exaggerations, form a solid background for the comedy-horror. William Paul rightly states that in Polański's film, "the final laugh is quite specifically conflated with the final scream"<sup>26</sup>, which after all stands at the core of the hybrid genre.

Out of numerous recent vampire-oriented productions, the New Zealand 2014 mocumentary *What We Do in the Shadows* stands out conspicuously. Written and directed by Jemaine Clement and Taika Waititi, the film presents a group of vampires living together in modern-day Wellington, NZ. The four Vampires – Viago, aged 379 (Taika Waititi), Vladislav, aged 862 (Jemaine Clement), Deacon, aged 183 (Jonathan Brugh), and Petyr, aged 8,000 (Ben Fransham) agree to allow a human film crew to follow them around with the view of creating a documentary on Vampires. In the process, the vampires have a chance to discuss their views upon history and the predicaments of the vampire community in contemporary times. Due to their nocturnal lifestyle and a necessity to maintain a low profile among humans, the vampires find the adjustment to 21<sup>st</sup> century living rather difficult, despite occasional night-time visits into town and contacts with their familiar, Jackie (Jackie Van Beek) - a human who wants to become a vampire. Hoping to

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<sup>25</sup> C. Standford quoted in T. Prasch, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> W. Paul quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 4.

be 'bitten', Jackie plays servant to Deacon and willingly performs the task of a cleaner after bloody meals, as well as valet and provisioner of virgins for the hungry vampires. One such occasion results in the accidental creation of a new vampire, Nick (Cori Gonzalez-Macuer), who, initially planned as a victim, is bitten by Petyr and escapes. This occurrence leads to Nick's eventual transformation. As a newly-turned vampire, Nick poses a danger to the safety of the hideout and the vampires themselves. Other problems encountered throughout the story become topics discussed by the vampires in front of the camera, including the re-appearance of Vladislav's nemesis, 'the Beast' (Elena Stejko); vampire-lupine relatives, as well as the interviewees' attitudes towards contemporary politics, fashion, humans and everyday existence.

Proclaimed by the Guardian as "the best comedy of the year"<sup>27</sup>, *What We Do in the Shadows* is indeed filled with humour both visual, verbal and conceptual. The vision of four undead specimens cohabiting a house kept and furnished in a pristine Gothic style acquires an aspect of hilarity the moment the house-mates introduce themselves to the viewers. The realisation soon dawns that in fact we are being taken on a guided tour through the realms of pop-culture vampire stereotypes and icons.

Viago is a pedantic 18<sup>th</sup> century dandy with a wide grin and a friendly disposition who displays a certain gallantry towards his victims and stays very close to the mesmerising elegance of Bela Lugosi. It is Viago who constantly appeals to his house-mates' sense of decency, aesthetics and hygiene, urging them to keep the house clean of rotting corpses, skeletons and dirty, bloody dishes. He also philosophises about the *savoir vivre* of killing for food: "One of the most unfortunate things about being a vampire is that you have to drink human blood. I like to make a real evening of it. Play some music. Maybe give them [the victims] some nice wine. It's their last moment alive so why not make it a nice experience". Therefore, the encounters with a victim-to-be are reminiscent of a romantic date, at least to begin with.

Vladislav, on the other hand, is on numerous occasions overtly linked to the image and lifestyle of the infamous Wallachian Voivode, Vlad the Impaler, popularly considered the inspiration behind Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Older than Viago, Vladislav finds the civilised restrictions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century hard and oppressive, which makes him nostalgic about the "good old times" in the age of tyranny and unrestrained bloodshed, wherein he lived.

The youngest of the group, an ex-Nazi vampire, Deacon, is short-tempered and prone to fight and express his opinions freely. He considers himself the sexiest creature

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<sup>27</sup> The Guardian review, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/nov/20/what-we-do-in-shadows-review> (13.11.2017).

on the planet, thus constituting an interesting combination of *The Twilight* Edward Cullen and Hammer Horror Christopher Lee's Dracula.

The last member of the household is the misanthropic 8000-year-old Petyr, a Count Orlok styled figure with an adequately misshapen body and as equally silent and terrifying as Murnau's original. Petyr keeps to himself. He does not take part in the nightly gatherings and discussions of the household matters. Nor does he join the outings and other events. Petyr resides in his coffin in the cellar and emanates the aura of dread, ancientness and awe-evoking respect even among his house companions.

Humour in *What We Do in the Shadows* stems as much from a mocking take on conventions as from the expressed ideas and their comic delivery. The agreement about not devouring the film crew is honoured, and thus the vampires have an opportunity to express their opinions directly to the camera. In the process they expose the lore of the vampire universe and confirm or deny folk-beliefs concerning their species. They can fly even in their human forms, but also possess the ability to transform into bats. They have no reflection in the mirror, which results in recurring fashion dilemmas, as they cannot see what they look like. They are powerful mesmerists and hypnotists. Sunlight is lethal to them, as proved by the unfortunate death of Petyr, who falls victim to a vampire hunter and, in the timeless fashion of Nosferatu, perishes in the sunlight. Vampires cannot eat human food, a fact proved by the newborn Nick, who pays for his cocky attempt with an indomitable explosion of bloody vomit. The rule of exclusiveness and secrecy is also valid. As it has been for centuries, vampires must stay in hiding and keep a low profile. This turns out to be problematic for young Nick, who was brought up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is incapable of taking this law seriously. We find him wondering the streets chatting to random humans and announcing himself a vampire to anyone who'll listen: "I'm a vampire [...] Twilight, have you seen it? Ok. I'm the main guy in Twilight." Unfortunately, his brazen attitude leads indirectly to Petyr's death. After a comic sequence of an official 'vampire trial' conducted by Viagio, Vladislav and Deacon, Nick gets sentenced to a "walk of shame" (performed by means of his fellow-vampires walking in circles around him repeating the word "shame"), and he is eventually expelled from the house.

Relations with humans, werewolves and romantic matters provide further sources of humour in the film. Apart from Jackie, the familiar and servant, the vampires befriend Stu (Stu Rutherford), a human friend of Nick's who accepts the truth of vampirism with stoicism and consents to continue his camaraderie with Nick and his new vampire friends. Stu is an IT specialist who contributes to the congregation's eventual familiarisation with computers, the internet, and the fun of social media. Taciturn and oscillating on the verge of social impairment, Stu is joyfully accepted by the vampires and, in contrast to Nick, soon becomes everyone's favourite. The feeling of appreciation and admiration intensifies further after Stu heroically saves Vladimir's life by means of staking an aggressive opponent during the annual supernatural ball.

Throughout the film there are several encounters with werewolves, the eternal enemies of the vampire species. Their chance meetings are thronged with mutual violent invectives addressing smell, looks and intelligence. It is during one such occasion that Stu falls victim to the werewolves' pack during the full moon. Aware of the inevitability of a looming disaster, the werewolves gave warning to the vampires and Stu, imploring them to leave. The coven flees too late, though, and soon the vampires are left to mourn over Stu, believed to have been killed in the fray. However, fate has another scenario for the friendly human. Stu survives the attack, although as a result is transformed into a werewolf. This turn of events leads to the unexpected improvement of vampire-werewolf relations, and one of the final scenes of the film presents both supernatural groups united in a celebration at the vampire abode.

Toying with stereotypes manifests also in Viago's and Vladislav's love stories. On numerous occasions Vladislav mentions his nemesis, the Beast. His memories are accompanied by a collection of images depicting visions of beasts as imagined in art and historical records throughout the ages. The mystery of the Beast is unveiled during the vampire ball, whereby the viewers learn that the term in fact relates to Vladislav's ex-girlfriend, Pauline (Elena Stejko), and refers to his pet name for name for Pauline during their affair. The irony of the love story is that despite Vladislav's ever-passionate feelings of love and hatred towards Pauline, she does not seem to remember him. After a dramatic fight scene at the ball, wherein Pauline strongly opposes to the presence of humans (namely Stu and the film crew) at what should have been a strictly supernatural event, the couple gets reunited for another attempt at a romantic liaison.

Viago's story, on the other hand, involves a romantic attachment to a human girl, the reason for his visit to New Zealand 80 years ago. Held up by a slow postal service, Viago's coffin arrives in New Zealand too late to prevent the girl's marriage to another man. For eight decades, from a distance, Viago worships the woman (currently a resident of a home for retired people). At the end of the movie they are also granted their happy ending, and as they explain to the camera crew: "Some people freak out a bit about the age difference. Uh, they think, what's this 96-year old lady doing with a guy four times her age. And, you know, I don't care... It doesn't make any difference".

Perhaps one of the film's jokes most frequently discussed by reviewers comes from an interview with Deacon, the ex-Nazi vampire, as he describes living in the time of World War II. He recalls how in the aftermath it was 'not easy to be a Nazi, and to be a Nazi vampire was even worse'. The taboo of the subject and seriousness of the tone is alleviated by Deacon's remark: "I don't know if you know that the Nazis lost that war." The assumption that his interlocutors might be unaware of the World War II and its outcome shifts the focus and results in hilarity and ridiculing of a very controversial subject.

Without a murmur of dubiety, both examples discussed herein, namely '*The Fearless Vampire Killers*' and '*What We Do in the Shadows*' can be granted the title of comedy-horror masterpieces that combine tradition with novelty, folk beliefs with literary and cinematic stereotypes, and absurd humour with esoteric subject. The sheer number of comedy-horror screen productions in the era from Post-WWII to the New Millennium highlights a demand for this hybrid genre, further strengthened by the viewers' constant delight in scary and morbid subjects, and seeing monstrous characters being ridiculed and trivialised up to the point of evoking irrepressible laughter.

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