Megan Hall

Professor Fischer

English 4170: Film Theory and Criticism

12/10/2014

*Dracula Untold*: Cinematic Vampires

 Gary Shore’s *Dracula Untold*, which hit theaters on October 10, 2014, is an origin story about the famous vampire Dracula. The film starts out in the late 1400s with the young lord/prince Vlad Tepes III lives a peaceful life ruling their small kingdom with his family. One day, a Turk warlord, Sultan Mehmed II, demands from Vlad a thousand boys plus his own son, Ingeras, to create an army. This causes him to seek aid from the creature in a cave, the Master Vampire, to give him a terrible power to allow him to protect his kingdom and family from the Turks. However, the price for said power is that Vlad will be the Master Vampire’s pawn in the future if he were to drink blood. Unlike earlier films, *Dracula Untold* makes the main character into a romanticized anti-hero.

 Vampires vary from continent to continent but share similar attributes to other more familiar vampires that we know of. An example is the Malaysian version of vampires is the langsuyar. The langsuyar had different variations but all dealt with drinking blood through a hole in the neck and generally from children. The origin of the langsuyar came from a story about a ‘woman of extreme beauty’ bore a stillborn baby (Melton). When she was told about the condition of her baby, the woman ‘recoiled from the shock’ and suddenly clapped her hands together to fly to a nearby tree (Melton). The woman could be seen from time to time and was identifiable by her green robe, long fingernails, and ankle-length black hair.

The langsuyar was also considered as a bansheelike flying demon that could scream like a banshee. I could only find how the Malaysians prevent women who either died in childbirth or in 40 days immediately following (during which time she was considered unclean). To prevent the woman from becoming a langsuyar, her family placed glass beads in her mouth (which stopped any bansheelike shrieks) and to prevent her from flying, eggs were placed under her arms and a needle in the palm of each hand (Melton). I saw no mention of how they were to kill off their vampire versions.

*Dracula Untold* is not exactly a horror film but a fantasy/action/drama film with some aspects of horror thrown in. An example of this film still having some aspects of horror is the scene with Vlad and two men enter the cave that is in Broken Tooth Mountain. Upon entering the cave, Vlad notices that the floor of the cave is covered in crushed bone. The two men that entered with him were killed by a creature that lives within the cave. The creature starts to go after Vlad goes for the entrance but trips and falls to the floor. Vlad is able to take a swipe at the creature and harming it a bit as he backs away. Once he gets into the sunlight, the creature doesn’t follow and retreats back into its cave. The blood on Vlad’s sword dissipates in the sunlight causing him to be curious and intrigued.

Another example is when Vlad returns to the cave in order to find the creature that haunts the cave because it can kill the Turks. The creature is a Master Vampire who says that others who have entered the cave have reeked of fear but with Vlad, he smells hope. The Master Vampire strikes a deal with him where they both get what they want. He gets freedom from the cave in order to wreak havoc upon the world and Vlad gets the power to protect his people and family. So, Vlad hears the Master Vampire on this deal and understands the price if he were to feed on human blood during the three-day this deal and understands the price if he were to feed on human blood during the three-day trial of said powers. He accepts the terms of the deal and drinks the Master Vampire’s blood from a skull cup.

Examples like the scenes I have talked about have elements of horror in them but not having the film being named a horror film. The elements are iconography, setting, narrative, style, characters, and theme. The iconography is the attributes that we associate with vampires and the two versions that they are portrayed: handsome and hideous. The setting is, in most cases in the film, very film noir especially when there is a fight sequence or an interaction between Vlad and the Master Vampire. The narrative is the typical good vs. evil but without any terrorizing of a community by a supernatural monster. As far as we know, during the years up to the present, the Master Vampire didn’t do any terrorizing of large groups of people and the people fear Vlad for a little while.

The style uses sound make the fight sequences intense and the interactions between Vlad and the Master Vampire suspenseful and dreadful. We also get two different scenes where we get to see through Vlad’s eyes during the 1000 men fight sequence and the Master Vampire’s eyes as he is hunting Vlad and his men in the cave. The characters are very typical of a horror film because our two main characters are vampires. Vlad is a good vampire and the Master Vampire is an evil vampire. The theme is good vs. evil as well as loyalty vs. deceit. The loyalty vs. deceit can be seen throughout the film particularly between Vlad and his people after he has turned them into vampires.

The elements of horror don’t play a major role in this film because the film is an origin story and the elements help bring the connection to the other vampire films that were horror films. The 1931 film version of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* with Bela Lugosi playing as Count Dracula is one example of vampire films in the horror genre. In the 1931 film, Count Dracula is portrayed as a villain and attacking innocent people for his own gain. Another example is the 1970 *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* with Christopher Lee playing as Count Dracula. In the 1970 film, Count Dracula is still portrayed as a villain and attacking innocent people for his own gain.

In *Dracula Untold*, Vlad Tepes III, later to be known as Dracula, is an anti-hero because of his past as a child soldier for the Ottoman Empire and impaling innocent people. In the conversation with the Master Vampire, Vlad was asked, “Why spill blood if not for the pleasure of it?” In reply, Vlad says, “Because men do not fear swords. They fear monsters. They run from them. By putting one village to the stake, I spared ten more. Sometimes the world no longer needs a hero. Sometimes what it needs…is a monster (Dracula Untold).” Vlad even tries to have a better future for himself as well as for his family and people. He accepts his past and tries to put it behind him as he moves forward in his life.

Vlad is also seen as a more relatable character because of his past and the flaws that he now has. People could easily see themselves as Vlad even people who have a past that they are not exactly proud of. Even after he becomes a fully fledged vampire, Vlad is still seen as human because of how he acts and behaves. His morals and his past keep him from turning evil and becoming the stereotypical vampire that everyone is familiar with.

Now, why did Vlad go to the Master Vampire in the first place? The reason being is that Vlad has no army to speak of, just a few guards. He needed to find a way to protect his people from the Ottoman Empire even the odds are against him. Vlad had noticed that Turkish scouts were killed by something extremely powerful and it was at Broken Tooth Mountain. He had gone to the cave in the mountain and faced a creature that was extremely powerful and attacked in the dark. Vlad learns the truth about the creature being a vampire from a monk named Brother Lucian. He goes back to the cave and strikes a deal with the Master Vampire to gain the power that he needs but at a price. The price is being a vampire for eternity and being a pawn for the dark powers and the Master Vampire in future dealings.

The abilities that Vlad gains are the strength of 100 men, the speed of a falling star, night vision, the ability to shift into a colony of bats, control over the night, control over all the creatures of the night, rapid healing, super hearing, and drinking blood. He also gets the weakness against anything made of silver. Later in the film, Vlad gains control over the weather to be able to shield him and other vampires from the sun. He uses all of his new abilities when fighting the 1000 men and at the main Ottoman Empire encampment when he has an army of vampires.

The Master Vampire has all the abilities and the one weakness we know of as well. If Vlad and the Master Vampire were to fight, Vlad would be at a disadvantage because the Master Vampire has been around much longer and has experience. However, Vlad is younger and has a very quick mind when it comes to warfare and strategy. It would be interesting to show the fight ends up if there is a sequel. The power/abilities are rather common in film but vary from culture to culture as I mentioned before. What is seen in the film seems to be taken from a Christian Europe stand point as well as what we have in the U.S. whether it is Christian or from another religion.

In order for Vlad to gain the abilities, he had to drink the Master Vampire’s blood then die. Later, he finds himself face down in the river with his head out of the water. He finds that he has gained the abilities of the vampire after cutting his hand on rock and noticing the rapid healing taking place. Vlad tests some of his new abilities such as his hearing and night vision. He doesn’t start using the ability to shift into a colony of bats until after he hears cannon fire in the distance and in the direction of his castle. He finds that his castle is under attack by the 1000 of the Ottoman Empire’s men and enters the castle without being seen as a colony of bats. Vlad gives his people an inspirational speech about how he is not going to let the Ottoman Empire win and take the children.

Vlad exits the castle through the front gate in a new change of clothes in order to face down the 1000 men. He uses all of his vampire abilities during the fight sequence and we see him victorious in the end surround by the bodies of the dead Turks. We don’t exactly see what Vlad to the bodies after he talks to his council to not ask what had happened. It is not until later in the film that we see that he has impaled all the bodies of the dead Turks except for one so that Sultan Mehmed II gets a message from Vlad.

Since the 1000 men fight sequence, the soldiers for the Ottoman Empire start getting scared and don’t want to go into battle against Vlad. After the fight, Vlad and his people go and take refuge in a nearby monastery in order to prepare for the next battle. It is there where Brother Lucian figures out that Vlad is a vampire and asks to kill him in order for him to enter heaven. This causes panic among the people and causes them to burn the forge that Vlad is in. He comes out of the forge as he is healing rapidly and telling his people that they are not alive because that they could fight but what he has done for them.

The only ones that do not seem to fear Vlad but to be generally worry about him is his wife, Mirena, and his son, Ingeras. Mirena had asked how he became what he had become and Ingeras did not ask why his father did what he did. Both knew that Vlad did what he did in order to protect them and the rest of the people from the Ottoman Empire. Also, they knew really well and knew that he wouldn’t do something like this if he didn’t have any other choice in the matter. Vlad’s people wouldn’t know him as personally so they wouldn’t have much to say about what he does because he is the leader and has to make the tough choices.

The film was based off of a historical figure known as Vlad Dracul III, better known as Vlad Tepes III. His actual birth date is unknown but could have been in the late 1430s. His birth place was Schassburg, also known as Sighisoara, in Transylvania. Soon after his birth, Vlad’s father, Vlad Dracul II, traveled to Nuremberg, Germany where he was invested with the insignia of the Order of the Dragon (Melton). Vlad Dracul II was able to take the throne of Wallachia from his half-brother in 1436 and entering into an alliance with the Turks two years later. The Sultan doubted Vlad Dracul II’s loyalty and in order to reaffirm the loyalty, Vlad II gave the Sultan his younger sons, Vlad II and Radu, to remain with him to guarantee their pact (Melton).

After sometime with the Sultan and after his father was murdered and older brother burned alive in December 1447, the throne of Wallachia was open for Vlad III to take since he was the rightful successor. However, with the backing of a Hungarian governor named John Hunyadi, Vladislav II (a member of another branch of the family) claimed the throne. Vlad tried his claim to the throne in 1448 but only kept it for a few months. Several years later in 1456, Vlad III defeated Vladislav II and reigned for six years as Prince Vlad Dracul III. He was given the nickname Vlad Tepes III and ‘Tepes’ means ‘Impaler’ because his favorite form of punishment was to impale people with wooden stacks (Melton).

Vlad Tepes III was defeated after his six year reign and tried to take back the throne some years later in the year of 1475. But, Vlad Tepes III was assassinated either in the end of December 1476 or early January 1477 (Melton). Yet, his fame lives on to this day and has inspired many vampire stories.

The film also states four different topics that show up in today’s world. The four conflicts are U.S. vs. Terrorism, Christianity vs. Islam, Stereotypes (Hollywood stereotype of Islam and breaking free from them), and Nature vs. Nurture. These topics show up everywhere we look and three of them we really do not want to talk about. The reason that we may not want to talk about it is because everyone is very sensitive these days and can anger very easily.

The first topic that I am going to talk about is U.S. vs. Terrorism. We see a lot of things in the news whether it be online, on the TV, or in the newspaper. We also hear what terrorism is, what it looks like, and how the U.S. is going to combat terrorism. In the film, Vlad could possibly be seen as the U.S. and the Turks being terrorism. Vlad tries everything he can think of to deal with the Turks but has to resort to fighting. The U.S. tries everything to deal with terrorism but has to resort to fighting, if the U.S. hasn’t.

The second topic is Christianity vs. Islam. These two religions have been pretty much at each other’s throat even though they are very similar to each other. They both deal with one God and his word of how the people should act and practice the religion. Both religions have a book that each have that is suppose to the one God’s word: Christianity is the Bible and Islam is the Qur’an. In the film, Vlad could be seen as Christianity since he practices it from the few references made by Mirena. The Turks could possibly be seen as Islamic even though no reference was made it was mentioned that Vlad once prayed like them but changed over to Christianity.

The third topic is the stereotypes that can be seen within the film. For starters, how Hollywood portrays Islamic folk as possible barbarians and imbeciles. Hollywood should more accurately portray different people and the different religions that there are in the world. Also, this film breaks the typical stereotypes for a vampire and makes it more romanticized and human even though it is an immortal being. This film is a good starting point in taking down the stereotypes and going a different path when trying to tell a story.

The fourth and final topic is the Nature vs. Nurture. In real life, Vlad Tepes III left the Turks and became a Christian. His younger brother, Radu, stayed behind with the Turks and became Islamic. The same can be true within the film even though we are not exactly which Vlad’s brother is but we could make a guess that it might be the Sultan impersonator in the second battle. I find it hard deciding which one was raised by nature and the other was raised by nurture. If I were to guess, I would say that Vlad was raised by nature and his younger brother, Radu, was raised by nurture. I would say that Vlad is more in tune with nature since his transformation into a vampire and more fluid whenever he moves. However, his younger brother, Radu, is more metallic and industrial whenever he is seen by the audience even though it is not for very long.

Unlike earlier films, *Dracula Untold* makes the main character into a romanticized anti-hero. I have enjoyed talking about how many barriers have come down since this film aired last year such as the stereotype for vampires and how the films that they are in does not have to be a horror film. I deem this film a good one even though there may be a lot of people that might criticize the film as a whole or in parts.

Works Cited

"Dracula Untold." *IMDb*. IMDb.com. Web. 10 Dec. 2015.

George, Sam, and Bill Hughes. *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from the Enlightenment to the Present Day*. New York: Manchester UP, 2013. Print.

Groza, Adriana. *Transylvanian Vampires Folktales of the Living Dead Retold*. Jefferson: McFarland &, 2014. Print.

Jenkins, Mark. *Vampire Forensics: Uncovering the Origins of an Enduring Legend*. Washington: National Geographic Society, 2010. Print.

Melton, J. Gordon. "Vampires in Malaysia." *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead*. Completely Revamped, Fully Rev. and Expanded Ed., 2nd ed. Detroit: Visible Ink, 1999. Print.

Melton, J. Gordon. *The Vampire Gallery: A Who's Who of the Undead*. Detroit: Visible Ink, 1998. Print.

Muir, John Kenneth. *Horror Films of the 1970s*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2002. Print.