

Blood

VAMPIRE TYPOLOGIES

Types

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Submitted to Phil Patton

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Typologies



ABOVE, TOP | Nosferatu, Symphony of Horror (1922)

BELOW | Dracula (1936)

The vampire—that bloodsucking, undead defiler of the innocent—remains a powerful cultural archetype more than 100 years after Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) first delivered an ancient Eastern European superstition to a global audience. Vampire sightings occur every few minutes in today’s media, with dozens of new movies, TV shows, books, blogs, and websites devoted to the children of the night. We have cereal-trademark vampires and teen vampires and martial arts vampires and private investigator vampires. What gives? Beyond that endlessly appealing forbidden sex and death thing?

Vampires materialize from the shadows, forming adaptable villains for varied narratives of corruption. They’re changeable stunt doubles who stand in for the real problem, whether it’s immigrants flooding into countries where they aren’t wanted, or fearsome diseases and plagues, or the lost purity of virgins. Vampires appear at times of social flux because we can project whatever we like onto them, creating concrete visualizations of intangible fears and threats. The unpredictable and ever-present dangers of terrorism, global warming, and a dreadful world economy have created a climate of widespread social anxiety. The vampire endures because an enemy

with a clear-cut set of ways to defeat it—drive a stake through its heart, cut off its head, burn it—presents a tidy, easily-achieved solution.

Visual imagery used to depict vampires is remarkably consistent, derived from two distinct types, Nosferatu and Dracula. Transfusing and mingling these types, one gruesome and the other sophisticated, allows the vampire metaphor to remain flexible and suited to situations from horrifying to comical. The changeable forms of the vampire—human, bat, wolf, green fog, swarm of rats—parallel his ability to represent a wide range of woes.

The true undead *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror* (1922), the first cinematic portrayal of a vampire, looms over us corpse-like and ghastly. His fangs appear front and center of his upper jaw, like a rat's (which is fitting since the movie uses a plague metaphor throughout), his burning eyes are mesmerizing, his fingers taper into fearsome talons, his attire is most kindly described as gravewear. Other vampires that seem at first glance to be 100% Dracula often borrow at least one detail from Nosferatu. His all-out gruesome look is not usually literally translated to the others, though; the only recent one as consistently repellent in appearance as he, without any of Dracula's more alluring components, is Eli, the child vampire in *Let the Right One In* (2008). Even when she's just standing around, she's scary. Her little friend Oskar says, "You smell weird," and we don't doubt it for a moment.

The portrait of the sexy, cultured vampire arose from the Romantic movement in full swing when Stoker penned *Dracula*. Its continuing popular appeal can be traced to Bela Lugosi's suave appearance in the 1931 film—dramatic cape, medallion on a ribbon around the neck, widow's peak, white tie and tails. The

elegant vampire type lent itself easily to parody, creating a sort of harmless buffoon vampire. Watered-down and safe for children, the buffoon vampire doesn't draw characteristics from the frightful Nosferatu. Think of Grandpa Munster and Sesame Street's Count von Count.

Comic vampires, a buffoon subgroup, form a whole movie genre in themselves, trading allure for high camp. Nothing's sillier than someone sporting a tuxedo and opera cape in a modern world of stretch leggings and Uggs. *Blacula* (1972), despite his formidable fangs, is a camp spectacular. Christopher Lee in various Warner Brothers vampire horror flicks may have been scary once, but like most 1950's movie monsters his Dracula is high camp now. "I COME TO SUCK YOUR BLOOD!" Today's audience just giggles.

Stylish attire is a mainstay of the Dracula-based vampire. *The Hunger's* (1983) perfectly-coiffed Catherine Deneuve substituted couture for a cape, neatly avoiding the camp trap. Vicious little Tom Cruise as Lestat in *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) flounced around in campy dandified elegance (when he wasn't a festering, flaming cadaver, that is). Gary Oldman in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) alternately presented as a terrifying Nosferatu-like figure in the world's longest trailing red cape and as a top-hatted Victorian fop, but I like the Simpson's parody of him as Mr. Burns even better. How about the biker-chic outfits on *The Lost Boys* (1987)? Laughably dated, but that full-on 80's leather and heavy metal-inspired garb attempted to translate the look for a younger contemporary audience.

Fangs are perhaps the most obvious critical component of vampire typology although surprisingly, Lugosi's Dracula did not have them at all. Later Dracula-

based vampires introduced the familiar canine tooth fangs. Count Chocula mirrors Dracula in almost every way, but look sharp: his fangs sprout from the centralized Nosferatu location (though the most recently redrawn character has blunted their pointed tips into a squared-off shape, like Bugs Bunny dressed for Halloween.) Most portrayals of vampire dentition hew to a single pair of long dagger-like canines, but in the TV show *Blood Ties* (2007) the vampires flash a double set, in rows like a shark's teeth. *The Hunger's* David Bowie and Catherine Deneuve seem fangless, deploying tiny, wicked Egyptian ankh pendant-knives to do their bloodletting. Yet Susan Sarandon's arm is mysteriously perforated with two distinct round holes the morning after her visit to the fabulous vampire townhouse. Accessory fangs?

When they aren't being pilloried as infectious/corruptive agents or disease vectors (providing numerous medical metaphors: the plague, AIDS), vampires are often portrayed as outsiders or misfits: they long to fit in, to be like everyone else, to be loved. Since they stand in equally well for temporal and confusing life stages as they do for world issues, vampires fit neatly into teen-based shows, movies, and novels. Right now we can be entertained by teen-vampire football players and slackers and vampires at the prom. *The Vampire's Assistant*, to be released in time for Halloween, will feature John C. Reilly as an older vampire who offers an apprenticeship to a teen searching for a life path that won't make the expected stops at college-job-family. Becoming a vampire will give him membership in a different sort of family, though—a typical postmodern, alternative, non-traditional one.

Within the current crop of teenaged vampires, the type is fairly uniform: square-jawed, dark-haired, sensitive, conflicted Byronic male in love with a

mortal girl he (usually) doesn't want to corrupt. Fangs appear only at the moment they're needed. Some teen vampires even take an almost vegetarian approach to their diet, preferring to feed upon lower life forms because a remaining shred of conscience causes them to feel guilty about taking human life. *True Blood's* (2008) Bill Compton is trying to make a go of it on a diet of synthetic blood imported from (where else?) Japan. Edward, *Twilight's* (2008) teen vampire, sticks to animal blood. In another display of sensitivity, the tortured Stefan in the *Vampire Diaries* writes of his feelings in a (centuries old) leatherbound journal, giving his unrepentant vampire brother Damon more ammunition for mockery. The last scraps of humanity left in these guys give them audience appeal as bad boys who maybe can still be redeemed through the power of romantic love. Teen vampires' struggles against their dark natures win the sympathy of adolescent viewers on their own difficult journeys to adult identity.

No matter what metaphor is in use, vampires represent a threat offering a fool's bargain. They pit human desire to break free of time's grip and the ravages of age and death against a cruel and bloody disregard for others. Still, we find entertainment in these seductive invaders whispering of eternal youth and life, because in a way they are familiar and reassuring. Although we can't prevent their arrival, we know what to do when they fly in the window—if we trust ourselves to resist the allure of the forbidden that always accompanies the vampire.