

Adapting the Undead:

Vampires, Fidelity Criticism and Hammer Horror's *Dracula 1972 AD*

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This vampire which is amongst us is of himself so strong in person as twenty men; he is of cunning more than mortal, for his cunning be the growth of ages; he have still the aids of necromancy, which is, as his etymology imply, the divination by the dead, and all the dead that he can come nigh to are for him at command; he is brute, and more than brute, he is devil in callous, and the heart of him is not; he can, within limitations, appear at will when, and where, and in any of the forms that are to him; he can, within his range, direct the elements: the storm, the fog, the thunder; he can command all the meaner things: the rat, and the owl, and the bat – the moth and the fox and the wolf; he can grow and become small; and he can vanish and come unknown.

Bram Stoker, *Dracula*¹

In Don Mingaye's Hammer Horror film *Dracula 1972 AD* (1971), the fearsome vampire Dracula (Christopher Lee) is accidentally resurrected by a group of young, hip Londoners conducting an impromptu bacchanal in an abandoned church. A cheesy and unabashedly irreverent adaptation of Bram Stoker's classic novel, the film provides an interesting illustration of how adaptations that deviate widely from the form and tone of their source texts can illuminate broader discussions of film adaptation. Appropriately, vampirism is also a commonly used analogy for the relationship between adapted texts and their source material, where adaptations are seen to feed parasitically off both the content and prestige of their literary forebears.² In this paper I will evaluate this assessment of the adaptation process by examining the way that the vampire narrative has been reinterpreted through the camp and fleshy excess of 1970s horror, uncovering the generative possibilities of unconventional adaptations of classic literary works.

1.

Early critical analysis of the adaptation of novels to film, such as George Bluestone's *Novels into Film*³ and Geoffrey Wagner's *The Novel and the Cinema*,⁴ typically examines how closely adaptations correspond to their source texts, with

allowances for the differing expressive techniques of the two artistic mediums. As the field developed, analysis of film adaptation came to also acknowledge the interpretive value of the adaptation process, as in *Filming Literature*, where Neil Sinyard describes his critical approach as “Adaptation as Criticism,”⁵ where successful adaptations are considered to be those that are “not afraid to kick the novels around, to take liberties with character and structure when they feel they have more convincing readings to offer than the original, to emphasise some features and disregard others.”⁶ This approach, however, like earlier adaptation criticism, remains heavily grounded in the interpretation and cultural influence of the source text, as opposed to the artistic independence of the adapted work.

More recent theoretical work on adaptation expands the scope of analysis to include works that take a greater amount of creative licence with their source material, and particularly adaptations that show little intention of providing critical interpretation of the texts they have been adapted from. Thomas Leitch and Linda Hutcheon both address pastiche, allusion and adapted texts in unconventional genres alongside more traditional literary adaptations. In *Film Adaptation and its Discontents*, Leitch develops his adaptation theory as a counterpoint to E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, advocating the reading and interpretation of many different types of text over adherence to a conventional literary canon: “Emphasising literacy over literature does not assume that all adaptations are equally valuable or that they are just as good as their originals. It simply declines to place the question of evaluation at the centre of the discipline.”⁷ While avoiding evaluative description, Leitch distinguishes several categories of adaptation defined by degree of correspondence to the original text: “Both adaptation and allusion are clearly intelligible only within a broader study of intertextuality that will not begin until students of adaptation abandon their fondness for huddling on the near end of the slippery slope between adaptation and allusion, where categorical distinctions still seem seductively plausible.”⁸ In so doing, Leitch notably allows space for the kinds of adaptation rarely given much critical attention in earlier studies, including pastiche, porn, (meta)commentary and allusion. Significantly, Leitch acknowledges that most adapted films display characteristics of more than one of these categories.

Like Leitch, Linda Hutcheon frames types of adaptation within a continuum between works that prioritise fidelity and those that deliberately

diverge from the source text. Hutcheon's schema however begins with a category of texts rarely included in studies of adaptation: literary translations and musical transcriptions, "forms in which fidelity to the prior work is a theoretical ideal, even if a practical impossibility."⁹ Interpreting translations and transcriptions as adaptations further indicates the limitations of fidelity criticism by underlining the impossibility of transferring content between texts; even in instances where the intention of the author is faithful replication and genre remains the same.

Hutcheon also recognises that due to the firmly established hierarchy of medium in popular culture analysis, adaptations tend to be valued differently depending on what genre they are adapted to: art-house film adaptations are generally considered more effective than popular film adaptations, and adaptations to opera and ballet are taken more seriously than adaptation to film.¹⁰ Hutcheon disputes these distinctions, asserting that above all "adaptation proper" requires stories to be "reinterpreted and rereleased,"¹¹ and thus includes parodies and other unconventional forms alongside adaptations that aim to correspond closely to the source text. Tellingly, Hutcheon does not come to categorise adaptations until her final chapter, and does so only in addressing the question of what is *not* an adaptation.

In a fascinating collaboration with biologist Gary Bortolotti, Hutcheon additionally suggests that adaptation should be considered as homologous to evolution, in a theoretical move that she describes as an "adaptation" of Richard Dawkins theory of cultural transmission through memes.¹² For Bortolotti and Hutcheon, the replicator in cultural transmission is the narrative (rather than the idea, as in Dawkin's theory). In these terms, evaluating adaptations in terms of their effectiveness in propagating the core narrative of the source text – either between genres or over time – offers another possible alternative to the persistent influence of fidelity criticism.

2.

In *Dracula 1972 AD* the most explicit links to Bram Stoker's novel are made and severed in the opening scene. An authoritative narrator gravely introduces our villain: "The year 1872, and the nightmare legend of Count Dracula extends its terror far beyond the mountains of Carpathia to the Victorian metropolis of

London. Here in Hyde Park, the final confrontation between Lawrence Van Helsing and his arch enemy, the demon vampire Dracula.” Having established its connection to the Victorian original, the film makes a dramatic match cut from Van Helsing’s funeral to a jet soaring over swinging London and the credits begin. Dracula’s modern day victims are introduced as they crash a cocktail party in an upscale flat. In the first of many scenes that function largely as vehicles for the exhibition of Stephanie Beacham’s macramé clad cleavage, the deviant status of the protagonists is colourfully underscored: the band is shaggy haired, go-go dancers gyrate on a grand piano and a couple make-out languidly under a lavish banquet table.

This abrupt departure from the source material is not unusual for cinematic adaptations of Victorian monster fiction. As Hutcheon acknowledges, Dracula films are often more easily identifiable as adaptations of previous Dracula films rather than adaptations of Stoker.¹³ In the case of *Dracula 1972 AD*, this impression is aided by the fact that both Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing reprise the roles they originated in Hammer’s first *Dracula* in 1957.¹⁴ Leitch also acknowledges this phenomenon in his discussion of secondary, tertiary and quaternary imitations; adaptations that derive content from both the original source and existing adaptations:

Films like *The Bride of Frankenstein* and *Dracula’s Daughter* (1936), which are sequels to adaptations, might be defined as adaptations not of an earlier story but of an earlier character, setting, or concept [...] Adaptation theory tends to assume that adaptation focuses on the plot of the progenitor text, but arguments about fidelity to the earlier text’s spirit should be equally open to adaptations based on a character like Sherlock Holmes or Frankenstein’s monster with the ability to generate continuing adventures, especially if those adventures follow the same narrative formulas over and over again.¹⁵

This “ability to generate continuing adventures” is equivalent to the propagation of simple narratives central to Hutcheon and Bortolotti’s cultural transmission theory, where the success of a narrative is evaluated with regard to frequency rather than the accuracy of replication.

When considered as one in a crowd of twentieth century Dracula film adaptations, what sets *Dracula 1972 AD* apart, particularly in the context of British horror, is its conspicuously contemporary style. While typical in some ways of

Hammer's earlier cinematic offerings, employing the studio's typically intense and suggestive cinematic colour palette,¹⁶ at the same time the film establishes a peculiar self-conscious modernity. The younger characters' dialogue in the film is modishly idiomatic, almost to the point of incomprehensibility, as when one admonishes another: "That gig went out with mini-skirts, you schlep!"¹⁷ Michael Vickers' lamented 'blaxploitation' soundtrack¹⁸ is also unusual for a Hammer Horror score; typical studio soundtracks of the time sought to evoke nineteenth century music in order to lend a sense of grandeur beyond what could be achieved with the limited production budget.¹⁹

While set in a new era with a distinctly un-gothic atmosphere, *Dracula 1972 AD* essentially remains a creative re-imagining of the rise and fall of Dracula following the classic arch of the gothic novel, with Jessica (Stephanie Beacham), the great-granddaughter of the prologue's Van Helsing, acting as a stand-in for Stoker's heroine Mina. Following Hutcheon and Bortolotti, given that the plot is identifiably similar to that of the original novel, the question arises as to how effective the film is in propagating the Dracula narrative. This can be assessed by looking at how successfully the film engages with the thematic concerns of the story through its exploitation of Stoker's basic narrative framework.

The most common theoretical perspective on the thematic concerns of Victorian gothic fiction is anxiety theory,²⁰ the hypothesis that "both [Victorian fiction and culture] were obsessed with the preservation of a pure, homogenous, and unchanging national identity under siege from subversive elements."²¹ Similarities can be seen between the applicability of the vampire narrative to the socio-economic conditions of the 1970s and the anxiety experienced by Victorian audiences as described by Kathleen Spencer: "The fantastic allows writers and readers to take those aspects of their own culture that are most emotionally charged, most disruptive, and identify them as monstrous – that is, as violations not just of human law but of the nature of reality – so that society can be symbolically purged of its pollution."²²

The attraction of vampire fiction as source material for contemporary film adaptations lies in the potential for the narrative to be used to explore ideas of sexual and moral contagion in different social and historical contexts, where characters can unite against and defeat a hostile outside threat.²³ More recent socio-political applications of vampire stories present political subtexts that range

from the straightforward equating of vampirism with sex,²⁴ to more sophisticated explorations of monstrosity as a byword for difference.²⁵ In the historical context of the early 1970s, the anxieties addressed by *Dracula 1972 AD* are directly analogous to those entertained by Victorian monster fiction. The freewheeling behaviour of the young people in *Dracula 1972 AD* is set against the sober virtuosity of Van Helsing and the verbal reticence and conservative dress of the slightly dim-witted Inspector Murray.

How the representation of social anxiety in *Dracula 1972 AD* differs from the representation of social anxiety in *Dracula* is in the film's equivocation with respect to contemporary concerns about homosexuality and interracial relationships. *Dracula 1972 AD* features the first black and first male victims of Dracula in the Hammer Horror oeuvre,²⁶ reviving the homoerotic focus on men anticipating penetration already relatively explicit in Stoker's novel,²⁷ while extending the exploration of this social tension to also envelop interracial relationships.²⁸ The foregrounding of homosexuality as a potential social agitator here is also indicative of modern interpretations of vampirism more generally, as Sarah Sceats observes:

Vampires are highly sexual, yet their penetration is nongenital. They can be of either sex and any sexual orientation [...] While Victorian vampirism provided a vehicle for the expression of anxieties about unbridled sexuality (especially women's) vampirism has more recently been used as a vehicle for the expression of homosexual desire and gay culture.²⁹

Counter-culture youth movements are also distinguished as a possible source of social unease, with Jessica's gang referred to at various points as "fringe people", "anti-socials" and "animals". The group's leader Joe Mitcham is characteristically blasé about the prospect of communing with the devil: "Okay, okay. But if we do get to summon up the big daddy with the horns and the tail, he has to bring his own liquor, his own bird, and his own pot."³⁰

Here *Dracula 1972 AD* quite closely follows the thematic arch of the typical Victorian gothic fantasy as outlined by Craft; the introduction of a monster followed by a period of 'dangerous play': "Each of these texts first invites then admits a monster, then entertains and is entertained by monstrosity for some extended duration, until in its closing pages it expels or repudiates the monster

and all the disruption that he/she/it brings.”³¹ After introducing these contemporary social concerns – interracial and homosexual relationships, drug culture and promiscuity – the film then defaults to the conventional and conservative principles of horror cinema. Only the virginal Jessica Van Helsing survives Dracula’s rampage,³² after being rescued by her grandfather (Peter Cushing), who in so doing fulfils the conventional role of the Van Helsing character in the Dracula narrative – a representative and protector of patriarchal institutional power.³³

This corresponds with David Huckvale’s assessment that “[t]he typical Hammer product is, in many ways, related to the aesthetic of an Oscar Wilde horror story (typically, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*). Both share a fascination with corruption and evil, but severely criticise that evil and its temptations in their final, highly moral verdict upon it.”³⁴

However, the comparative frivolity of *Dracula 1972 AD* introduces tensions that remain inadequately addressed by a straightforward interpretation of the film as a tool for the management of the temptations of social subversion. In the film, as in Stoker’s novel, Dracula acts as the ultimate ‘other’: a foreign, ageless, nocturnal, cannibalistic monster of indeterminate sexuality. But when set against Miss Helsing’s counter-culture gang, Dracula reveals just how little social threat the young people pose. Rigby considers this contrast between the grandeur of Dracula and the ridiculousness of Jessica’s friends as a weakness of the film:

Houghton’s script destroys the whole point of updating Dracula by cravenly confining him to the Gothic confines on St Bartolph’s Church. Christopher Lee swirling in lonely grandeur as moonlight filters in above him and autumn leaves scurry from his path may make for a few moments of visual magic but it also makes him seem like an anachronism. Worse, Houghton gives his Kings Road trendies lines that were hopelessly untrendy even in 1972 – and unattractive performers like William Ellis manage to put them over as cringe worthy as possible – while other actors have to struggle with dialogue that is similarly unspeakable.³⁵

Some of the film’s clunky and “unspeakable” dialogue occasionally descends to unintentional hilarity, even when the screenplay escapes the idiom of its inexplicably naff gang:

Inspector Murray: This? This is something else again – three murders in the space of two nights and a bunch of spaced-out teenagers as my only suspects. A bunch of kids whose way of life is as foreign to me as...

Van Helsing: ...as that of a vampire?³⁶

In 'Horror and Humor,' Noël Carroll suggests that unintentional humour in horror films "can be explained by suggesting that the fearsomeness of the monster has not been sufficiently projected, often because of inept or outlandish special effects."³⁷ This is not entirely the case with *Dracula 1972 AD*. While Alucard suffers a comical demise at the hands of a vanity mirror and shower faucet, Christopher Lee's Dracula is a reasonably formidable monster. The unintentional humour of the film can most likely be traced to Dracula's incredibly dreary victims: the monster is not insufficiently horrifying; his victims are just too stupid to survive.

Dracula 1972 AD is by no means a cinematic triumph, but despite its corny dialogue, the film displays an impressive degree of self-awareness; as in the scene where it takes Van Helsing thirty-four seconds and the drawing of a complicated diagram to realise that 'Alucard' is 'Dracula' spelled backwards. Here Don Mingaye successfully pokes fun at one of the inescapable hurdles of adapting such a well-loved text; the audience will always be better aware of the dangers of a mysterious nocturnal stranger than the protagonists of any vampire film.

Undeniably frivolous under critical contemplation, *Dracula 1972 AD* illustrates the value of considering cheesiness as a critical perspective on non-canonical texts. According to Annalee Newitz 'cheese', a term frequently applied to B-Movies and TV movies of low budget and little high cultural appeal, refers to an "economic and cultural poverty in a given narrative."³⁸ In a critical context, cheese becomes an interpretive mode of consuming texts ironically, overlapping with, and analogous to, camp: "Cheese is what animates our pleasure in ridiculously obvious racial stereotypes of whites and blacks in 1970s entertainment [...] a way of laughing at the racist historical 'other'."³⁹ In this light the ironic viewing of a camp and cheesy film like *Dracula 1972 AD* becomes a way of comparing social attitudes between time periods that is critically similar to the act of adaptation, where a narrative is reconsidered and recomposed in different historical and social contexts.

Undeniably, *Dracula 1972 AD* is lowbrow and low budget, but considering loose and unconventional adaptations presents an alternative to conventional fidelity analysis of film adaptation. The relationship between *Dracula 1972 AD* and its source material is indicative of that of many twentieth century film adaptations of Victorian monster fiction, where the concept of monstrosity is used to lend weight to social anxieties that appear relatively benign in retrospect. Like the *Dracula* narrative, adaptation can function as a method of taking account of social change by comparing the familiar and the foreign. But is adaptation vampiric? Hutcheon does not think so: “it does not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying or dead, nor is it paler than the adapted work. It may on the contrary, keep the prior work alive.”⁴⁰ While certain similarities present themselves between the monster and the process, adapted texts are under no threat from our thirsty adaptors. There is plenty of blood to go around.

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- ¹ Stoker, Bram, *Dracula* (1897, repr., Blackie and Son: London, 1988), 239-40.
- ² An analogy discussed at length by Robert Stam in his introduction to *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, Stam, R & Raengo, A., eds. (Blackwell: Malden, MA., 2005). See also Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge: New York, 2006), 176.
- ³ Bluestone, George, *Novels into Film* (University of California Press: Berkeley), 1966.
- ⁴ Wagner, Geoffrey *The Novel and the Cinema* (Associated University Presses: Cranbury, 1975).
- ⁵ Sinyard Neil, *Filming Literature: The Art of Screen Adaptation* (Croom Helm: London, 1986), 117.
- ⁶ Sinyard, 117.
- ⁷ Leitch, Thomas, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to the Passion of the Christ*, (The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2007), 16.
- ⁸ Leitch, 126.
- ⁹ Hutcheon, 171.
- ¹⁰ Hutcheon, 2.
- ¹¹ Hutcheon, 171.
- ¹² Bortolotti, Gary R. & Hutcheon, Linda, 'On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and "Success" – Biologically', *New Literary History* 38.3 (2007), 446-7.
- ¹³ Hutcheon, 21.
- ¹⁴ Rigby, Jonathan, *English Gothic: A Century of Horror Cinema*. (Reynolds & Hearn Ltd. London, 2000), 51. Surprisingly, considering the number of times he reprised the role, Christopher Lee was initially cautious about being typecast as Dracula. "I did the first Dracula seven or eight years ago, and I always mentally said to myself that I wouldn't do another one, purely and simply because I don't wish to be associated entirely with one part... However, such is the greatness of the role that I did agree to play it again, although this will probably be the last time." 1965 interview with Christopher Lee relating to *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* (1966) cited in Rigby (125). Lee came to return to the role of Dracula in seven later films.
- ¹⁵ Leitch, 120.
- ¹⁶ Picart, Caroline Joan ("Kay") S., 'Visualising the Monstrous in Frankenstein Films', *Pacific Coast Philology* 3.1 (2000), 25.
- ¹⁷ Mingaye, Don, *Dracula 1972 AD*. (Hammer, 1971), video recording.
- ¹⁸ A soundtrack described by Rigby as "hideously inappropriate", 195.
- ¹⁹ Huckvale, David, 'Twins of Evil: an investigation into the aesthetics of film music', *Popular Music* 9.1 (1990), 7.
- ²⁰ A term coined by Nicholas Daly in *Modernism, Romance and the Fin de Siècle: Popular Fiction and British Culture 1880-1914* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1999), 33-4.
- ²¹ Furguson, Christine, 'Nonstandard Language and the Cultural Stakes of Stoker's Dracula', *ELH* 71.1 (2004), 229.
- ²² Spencer, Kathleen L., 'Purity and Danger: Dracula, the Urban Gothic, and the Late Victorian Degeneracy Crisis', *ELH* 59.1 (1992), 202.
- ²³ In contrast to the most recent vampire fiction resurgence, where as Tyree identifies, Vampires' danger is diluted by the beneficial relationship they develop with humans: "Edward, Bill and Eli [referring to the vampires of the film adaptations of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, Charlaine Harris' Sookie Stackhouse series, and John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Let the Right One In* respectively] embody a new combination of undead chum and unnaturally attentive lover, a sort of guardian angel with fangs." Tyree, J.M. 'Warm-Blooded: True Blood and Let the Right One In,' *Film Quarterly* 63.2 (2009), 32.
- ²⁴ As in Stephenie Meyer's popular teen series *Twilight*, where the explicit analogy of vampirism to sex supports Meyer's abstinence pedagogy. Silver, Anna, 'Twilight is Not Good for Maidens: Gender, Sexuality and the Family in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Series', *Studies in the Novel* 42.1-2 (2010), 123-4.
- ²⁵ In Alan Ball's television drama *True Blood*, adapted from Charlaine Harris' Sookie Stackhouse Series, a loose metaphor is drawn between the campaign for the fictional vampires rights and various contemporary and historical civil rights campaigns: the vampires of *True Blood* have "come out of the coffin", campaigning for the right to marry and own property. Ball, Alan, *True Blood* 'Strange Love' (HBO, 2008), video recording.
- ²⁶ Rigby, 195.
- ²⁷ Craft, Christopher, "Kiss Me with Those Red Lips": Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*", *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics*, Margaret L. Carter, ed. (UMI: Ann Arbor, 1988), 168-70.
- ²⁸ US horror films of the time went further in exploring social tensions relating to race and sexuality – in William Crain's Blaxploitation classic *Blackula* (1972), not only is the vampire African American, but his first victims are an interracial gay couple. Benshoff, Harry M., 'Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription,' *The Cinema Journal* 39.2 (2000) 38.

²⁹ Sceats, Sarah, 'Oral Sex: Vampiric Transgression and the Writing of Angela Carter,' *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 20.12 (2001), 117.

³⁰ Mingaye, 1971.

³¹ Craft, 167.

³² Indeed, Jessica is almost a parody of the virginal horror film survivor: the ward of a powerful man and frequently dressed in white, just before being kidnapped by Dracula's minions she asserts: "I've never dropped acid, I'm not shooting up, and I'm not sleeping with anybody just yet." Mingaye, 1971.

³³ Van Helsing's symbolic significance is discussed by Craft, 176-8.

³⁴ Huckvale, 34.

³⁵ Rigby, 195.

³⁶ Mingaye, 1971.

³⁷ Carroll, Noël, 'Horror and Humor', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57.2 (1999), 157.

³⁸ Newitz, Annalee, 'What Makes Things Cheesy?: Satire, Multinationalism, And B-Movies', *Social Text*, 63 18.2 (2000), 61.

³⁹ Newitz, 60-1.

⁴⁰ Hutcheon, 176.