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Monster Madness—Paper #2: Bram Stoker's *Dracula* vs. *Bram Stoker's Dracula*
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So often, reviews for a film adaptation of a monster-themed book conclude that “the book was better”; I don't always agree that one is better than the other, but more often feel that they are simply different; like apples and oranges. To explore this thought further, I compared Bram Stoker's novel, *Dracula*, with the 1992 film adaptation, directed by Francis Ford Coppola. I evaluated multiple film versions of the story (everything from the 1931 Bela Lugosi film to *Blackula*), but found Coppola's version the most appropriate for comparison since its title—*Bram Stoker's Dracula*—implies that it is as true to the original as possible.

First off, I would like to note that a tag line applied to Coppola's film, which appears directly on the cover of the packaging, claims that “true love never dies”. To anyone familiar with the book who had yet to see the film, it might be assumed that this is in reference to the love between Mina and Jonathan Harker; how Mina and Jonathan are able to fight seemingly insurmountable risks of death, driven to survive by their love for each other and desire to be together in life. However, after watching the film it seems that this tag line is in reference to a past-life love between Dracula and his lover, Elisabeta (a sub-plot which doesn't exist in the original story). Mina seems to be a re-birth of Elisabeta who, through such powerful love, is able to even remember bits of her past-life love experience.

This, in my opinion, is where Coppola was horribly wrong in titling his film with the Bram Stoker prefix. In Stoker's novel, Dracula is almost entirely a "monster", in the sense that he has little or no perceptible motives other than to stalk and feed upon (subsequently horrifying and killing) his victims. He acts more as an animal, concerned only with his primal urges to survive (though he deals with these urges in sly, pre-meditated, human-like ways). In Coppola's take, however, there is an alternate sub-plot which has Dracula as a passionate lover with almost super-human emotions. He is still a monster in the sense that he can transform into horrible beasts and kill people with no regret, but he does so to satisfy his longing for love. The viewer can almost sympathize with him as he cries over the loss of his lover, or claims that "the luckiest man who walks on this earth is the one who finds... true love". He is a man trapped inside a monster's body. This is much different than in the book, where he is hated and feared without a doubt of his monstrosity. In fact, the mask of a human form that he hides behind in the book can even be seen to add to his sinister traits; that he would take a human form to deceive his victims just makes him that much more dangerous and downright creepy. He is a monster hiding in a man's body.

The romantic sub-plot in Coppola's film is certainly an interesting addition to the story, however it changes the story far too much to call it "Bram Stoker's". I am curious as to the reasoning behind adding this love story, especially after learning that Coppola regretted using Keanu Reeves, and only did so to connect

with more female viewers. Was the original screenplay written faithfully to the novel, only to be Hollywood-ized by business conscious producers? It is also worth mention here that this is not the only case of a film attempting to faithfully retell the story of a novel but fail due to an exaggeration of romance. There seems to be a significant need in film (at least typical Hollywood film) to inflate all matters of love that exist in books; even to the point of reinterpreting sex as love.

This reinterpretation is actually a key point in the differences between the book and the movie. In the book, it could be said that Dracula “seduces” Mina in a manner; indeed it could be said that the theme of the entire book is seduction. However, the seduction is purely carnal; driven by the primal, sexual force which motivates all of Dracula’s behavior. In the film, this “seduction” is entirely different. It is based on Dracula’s human love and affection for the reincarnation of his past lover. In other words: Stoker’s *Dracula* is about sex while Coppola’s is about love.

I would be wrong to disregard many of the details in the book which are captured in the film here. Indeed, everything from exact quotes in the dialog to unexplained blue flames to Dracula’s mustache (the “long, white moustache” envisioned by Stoker is a detail from the book which is often lost entirely in translation to film) manage to make their way from the book into the film in some form or another. These details, however, fail to make up for the inconsistencies

between the basic themes and messages of the film when compared to the book.

One of the major difficulties that probably affected Coppola's re-telling of the story was the change in medium. The basic differences between film and literature make it almost impossible to faithfully translate any book perfectly. To start with, the sensations of sight and sound which are exploited in film are only imagined in literature. This makes recreating certain sensations that will live up to a viewer's imagination hard to do (especially when dealing with inexact states of hypnotism and dream; ie—when Jonathan Harker is confused as to whether or not his encounter with the three women at Dracula's castle was real or dream). Though I hate to make sweeping generalizations, I think it is safe to say that the general audience which views movies (especially in the genre of horror / monsters) is much different than that which reads related books (consider how many people have watched the story of Dracula vs how many have read it). This affects many of the aspects of how the story is told, from the pacing in time, to the finite details, to even the basic themes. Moviegoers (myself included) tend to have a shorter attention span and are less likely to "work" to get to the underlying ideas and subtleties in a story. More often than not, movies (especially major Hollywood blockbusters) are expected to tell the story on their own, whereas books may require a bit more reading (pun intended). It seems no coincidence that people "watch" movies, but "read" books.

I found that in Coppola's *Dracula* this concept affected the characters dramatically. The roles of each of the characters were dumbed down, making Van Helsing the obvious "hero" while Mina took much more of a backseat role in the eventual apprehension of Dracula; in fact, in the film she went as far as to aim a gun at Jonathan in order to protect the lover of her past-life. Unfortunately, she ended up filling the story's role of the lovely but vulnerable young woman who is confused by her feelings of love towards different men (so Hollywood!); much different from the take-charge, ingenious monster-hunter / inspiration-giver in Stoker's *Dracula*.

Another of the differences between film and literature which may be the most crucial in translation from one to the other is the creative process involved in production and the different levels of complexity within. When Stoker was writing *Dracula*, he conducted a great amount of research, as did Coppola. However, when it came time to put everything together into a cohesive whole, Coppola had much more to deal with than Stoker. The author of literature deals with (usually) a linear string of text that is read from beginning to end, and by themselves. They do not need to worry about how they will make something look real or believable; they just describe it and it is done (after a few editions etc). They alone are the creators. When a director, on the other hand, sets out to produce their film, it is not quite as straightforward. Costumes, set design, lighting, camera work, editing, acting, special effects... a seemingly endless list

of variables enters into the equation which are not in the complete control of the director, all of which require highly specialized skills and knowledge. Hence, the credits of a book can be listed on one line on the books cover, while the credits to a movie require several minutes and hundreds of lines to convey. With that many aspects of the story in that many people's hands, the risk of failure due to inconsistent understanding is much greater (on a side note: I could never understand why Dracula sports Japanese-style attire in Coppola's film).

All in all, I enjoyed Coppola's interpretation of Stoker's story. The things he added and changed to be his own were definitely interesting when compared to the original. Coppola is also a master of effects; his own metaphors which were added to the scenery and atmosphere of the story amplified the horror in many subtle but smart ways (tricks with shadows, reverse-footage effects, and other atmospheric trickery). The one thing that spoils it for me is that, according to the title, this is a gross misunderstanding of what Stoker's novel was really about. If the film were titled *Francis Ford Coppola's Dracula*, I would have been happy with it (well, maybe Keanu Reeves and Winona Ryder could have been replaced), but eventually, and unfortunately, it seems as though Hollywood mentality altered the accurate re-telling assumed in the film's name. I find it hard to believe that Coppola's take was intended to hold the same themes and basic messages, which is what confuses me most about the title.

In conclusion, there is no disputing that there are differences between film and literature which affect various methods of storytelling. It seems wrong to me then to say one is “better” than the other, since they are so different. Essentially what is (or what should be) being compared between film and book versions is not the just execution of the story (though that does play a role), but the entire story itself. *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* has a totally different (though externally similar) story than *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*.