

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Movie Review column for *Dvino Magazine*, a monthly production of *The Laredo Morning Times*.

October 2022

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Vampires, zombies fill undead categories in Gothic horror films

By T. Rob Brown

It's time for the return of moaning zombies, howling wolves, cackling witches, maniacally laughing overlords, and the unidentifiable Eastern European accent of vampires. Is that supposed to be Hungarian?

According to the *Dracula* novel, Count Dracula is supposed to be Szekely, a Hungarian-speaking ethnic group still found in Romania. The legends trace Dracula back to the historical figure Vlad the Impaler, a Romanian ruler also known as Vlad III, and often considered a national hero of Romania. He lived between 1448 and 1476 or 1477.

Along with those traditional Halloween sounds, come the whip zooms, dolly zooms and creepy transitions that make haunting cinema so much fun. Speaking of the most famous vampire of all time and transitions, there's no better place to start than with *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992).

Arguably using some of the best cinematic transitions made in the last 40 years, Oscar-winner Francis Ford Coppola reimagined the classic Gothic horror tale with modern actors of the time. Coppola is probably best known for his *The Godfather* films (1972 and 1974) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

Among the many talented actors in this film is one of the greatest character actors of the last 50 years, Gary Oldman, in the starring role of Dracula. What's amazing about his performance is his accent,

his ability to convey both horror, fright, contempt, humor and romance all in the same character—completely changing from the elder and grotesque vampire to the younger and suave count who seduces Mina Murray. It's like he's playing multiple characters in this film.

Oldman even had a big influence on the look of the character. Originally, the script called for various stages of old-age makeup for Dracula. While working with makeup effects wizard Greg Cannom, the two expanded the many looks of Dracula in the film to include the wolfen face, the full-body bat creature and more. Unfortunately, though, Oldman did suffer an allergic reaction to some of the latex makeup and even a claustrophobia attack while wearing the bat costume. Cannom and team went on to win an Academy Award for makeup effects for this film.

The theme “Love Never Dies” is central to the film and its soundtrack, including the Meat Loaf hit, *I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)*. The late Michael Lee Aday (Meat Loaf) passed away Jan. 20 this year. The music video featured scenes from the film, including the addition of a vampiric Meat Loaf.

The love and destiny themes intertwine here just as well as two lovers embracing. Dracula believes Mina is his lost love Elisabeta come back to him. Both women are played by Winona Ryder.

“I have crossed oceans of time to find you,” Dracula tells Mina in both the novel and the film.

“Do you believe in destiny? That even the powers of time can be altered for a single purpose? That the luckiest man who walks on this earth is the one who finds ... true love?”

Screenwriter James Hart began work on this retelling of the classic story back in the 1970s and continued working on it through the 1980s. By 1990, he almost allowed it to become a made-for-TV cable production. Fortunately for Hart, he had a bit of time to explore other options. Before time ran out, his script was rescued from basic cable hell by Ryder herself. The then 19-year-old actor was reading the script in search of more mature roles to move past her work as a child and teen film star. She was interested in playing Mina from the start.

One thing that kicks a film from the curb to the spotlight is star power. Ryder's interest in the film brought studios' interest. During a 1991 meeting with Coppola, she showed him the script. Coppola, a self-proclaimed fan of the book, joined the project.

During the early casting, both Johnny Depp, who was Ryder's boyfriend at the time, and Christian Slater were considered for the role of Mina's fiancé Jonathan Harker before it went to Keanu Reeves.

With a budget of about \$40 million, most of the production was shot on soundstages on the MGM California lot. One main exception was the scene where Dracula moves in daylight through the London streets—this was filmed in an outdoor backlot.

Coppola said, “The costumes are the sets.” He hired art director Eiko Ishioka to focus on the costumes and scale down the sets. One of the remarkable things in the film is the elaborate costumes worn by the key characters. These lush costumes add to the romantic elements in the film and set the grand scale of the time period and the goal of the film—to entrance us in its beauty as Dracula entrances those he intends to feed upon.

One of the most vivid visuals in the film centers around Dracula's long, flowing crimson robe. The designers decided to steer away from the classic caped vampire and that choice really paid off. These

decisions added to the uniqueness of this classic tale retold. This was further proven when Ishioka went on to win the Academy Award for costume design for the film.

Another of its legendary actors, Anthony Hopkins, portrayed the famous vampire hunter Dr. Abraham Van Helsing. Interestingly, Coppola said in a commentary track for the film that he thought the book's version of the character was "a real jerk" and he wanted the film version to be more vivid. As such, Coppola encouraged Hopkins to improvise, which resulted in some bizarre behavior for the vampire hunter.

Bram Stoker's Dracula (1992), Rated R, stars Oldman, Ryder, Hopkins, Reeves, Richard E. Grant, Cary Elwes, Billy Campbell, Sadie Frost, Tom Waits and Monica Bellucci. At 2 hours and 3 minutes, it received a certified fresh 77% on the Tomatometer at Rotten Tomatoes and a 79% audience score, plus a 7.4/10 on the International Movie Database. I give it two thumbs up.

Some of the other films where you can see Dracula and vampires include (not listed in any particular order): *Dracula Untold* (2014), the kid-friendly animated *Hotel Transylvania* (2012) series, *Van Helsing* (2004) with Hugh Jackman, Mel Brooks' *Dracula: Dead and Loving It* (1995), Marvel's *Blade* trilogy (1998, 2002, 2004) and *Morbius* (2022), the black-and-white classic *Nosferatu* (1929), Netflix's *Day Shift* (2022), the truly classic *Lost Boys* (1987), *Fright Night* (1985), *Daybreakers* (2010), *Dark Shadows* (2012), *Shadow of the Vampire* (2001), *Underworld* (2003) series, Robert Rodriguez's *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) and *Queen of the Damned* (2002), Stephen King's *Salem's Lot* (1979), the comedic *Transylvania 6-5000* (1985) with Jeff Goldblum and *Once Bitten* (1985) with Jim Carey, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992) and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012).

Or... there's that series of films featuring sparkly creatures misidentified as vampires, called *Twilight* (2008).

While vampires are probably No. 1 when it comes to Gothic horror films, a close second is the nearly immeasurable influence of other walking dead—zombies.

Returning to an earlier comment, whip zooms and dolly zooms are great ways to show suspense and put us on edge when creating films about the supernatural. This is no less true when it comes to zombie films.

These films come in a wide variety from those about fantasy zombies—ones created by magic—to sci-fi zombies—ones created by science or disease—to comedic zombie films. You might ask, "Wait, are there enough comedy zombie films for it to have its own category?" Indeed.

The main zombie film I'd like to talk about is Edgar Wright's *Shaun of the Dead* (2004). This is pretty much the one that started the whole sub-genre of comedy zombie films. I'm not certain it's the first one, but it's certainly the first one to become a major cult classic that spawned many imitators.

Whip pans and zooms are something Wright became known for in his style of visual storytelling. Watch closely as Shaun (Simon Pegg) gets ready for work in the morning, oblivious of anything going on in the world. Wright chooses to show this sequence through a series of quick and short closeup shots that zoom during each frame—this is a whip zoom—brushing teeth, flushing the stool, washing his hands, putting on a name tag, etc. This type of shooting and editing really draws us into the story.

These types of shots also make us feel uneasy as time is sped up. One of the best things a director can do in a suspenseful horror film is do whatever they can to make the audience feel uneasy, on the edge of their seats, waiting for the next big moment of startling fright or comedic horror.

If you're looking for a Halloween film that fits the theme, but also makes you laugh—this is one of the best I can recommend. It's a must-watch Halloween film for me every season.

One of the lesser-known facts about this film is that it's the first of Wright's "Three Flavours Cornetto" trilogy. These films each feature a different flavor of Cornetto ice cream cone. The strawberry flavor is featured in this film to represent blood. With a careful eye, you can catch these cones and their wrappers appearing in all three Wright films starring comedic duo Simon Pegg and Nick Frost.

Other trilogy films include *Hott Fuzz* (2007) and *The World's End* (2013). The second features the blue original Cornetto to represent the police and the third shows the green mint chocolate chip flavor—though only as a wrapper—the color of "little green men" from outer space.

The idea for the film originated during a zombie episode of the British sitcom *Spaced* (1999-2001), which included the creative team of Wright, Pegg and Jessica Stevenson. Frost was a supporting role in that series.

This film features the classic Queen song *Don't Stop Me Now*, which saw an increase in popularity following the film's release.

Shaun of the Dead (2004), Rated R, stars Pegg, Frost, Kate Ashfield, Lucy Davis, Dylan Moran, Bill Nighy, Penelope Wilton, Jessica Hynes and Peter Serafinowicz. At 1 hour and 39 minutes, it received a certified fresh 92% on the Tomatometer and a 93% audience score, plus a 7.9/10 on IMDb. I give it two thumbs up.

Recently, I finally watched *Scouts Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse* (2015), another comedy zombie film. This film stars Tye Sheridan of *Ready Player One* (2018) fame and David Koechner of *Anchorman* series fame (2004 and 2013). It's a good attempt, but certainly falls short of the "Shaun standard."

Combine that with both *Zombieland* films (2009, 2019), *The Dead Don't Die* (2019), the zombie romantic comedy *Warm Bodies* (2013), *Anna and the Apocalypse* (2018), *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2016), *Juan of the Dead* (2012), Singapore film *Hsien of the Dead* (2012), *Shed of the Dead* (2019), *Black Friday* (2021), *Attack of the Southern Fried Zombies* (2017), *Dead Before Dawn* (2012) and more ... you come up with one funny sub-genre.

"The show must go on."