

Revenants Reimagined: The Persistence of Balkan Vampire Lore in Contemporary Digital Contexts

Alton ARNOLD ¹

This article examines the transformation of Balkan vampire folklore, particularly revenant figures such as the “strigoi” and “vampire” within contemporary digital environments. Based on immersive fieldwork in Romania and Serbia, the study explores how myths that once served as communal tools for processing grief, fear, and survival are now mediated through memes, movie tropes, and algorithmic fragments. Drawing on Jungian archetypes, digital folklore theory, and public history frameworks, the research traces the tension between cultural preservation and commodification. While online platforms offer new avenues for storytelling, they risk flattening the emotional depth and communal voice of traditional myth. This study argues for a more intentional engagement with folklore in the digital age, one that honors ancestral narratives while recognizing their evolving role in shaping identity, memory, and intergenerational transmission.

Keywords: *Balkan, vampire, folklore*

1. Introduction

In a Transylvanian village nestled deep in the Carpathian Mountains, “bunica mea” (a grandmother) sits in her modest cottage, her weathered face glowing in the firelight. Gathered around her are her “nepoţi” (grandchildren), wide-eyed and silent, as she recounts tales from her youth. She speaks of the stories her own “bunica” (grandmother) once told her at their age, tales of the “strigoi”, restless spirits that rise from the grave, hungry for the blood and warmth of the living. These stories were never just entertainment; they were warnings, rituals, and memories etched into the rhythm of rural life. Each tale carries the weight of generations, passed down like heirlooms of fear and reverence.

Miles away, and decades removed, a teenager sits in his bedroom, scrolling through TikTok beneath the glow of a phone screen. Vampires flash across his feed,

¹ Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia (USA), altonarnoldPhD@yahoo.com

glamorous, romantic, meme-worthy. The vampire has been replaced by movie tropes, TV characters, and viral dance challenges. What was once a cautionary tale murmured by a “bunică” beside the fire is now a viral clip, looped and liked, its meaning lost in the scroll.

These stories, once steeped in ritual and thick with meaning, now scroll past in seconds flattened into pixels, competing with cat videos and trending dances for attention. In the blur of digital consumption, folklore doesn’t vanish, but it struggles to breathe. It survives, yes, but its voice is softened, its context stripped, its power to shape identity reduced to ambient noise. What once anchored communities now drift, untethered, in the feed.

This article investigates the digital resurgence of Balkan vampire folklore, highlighting how algorithm-driven platforms both reanimate and destabilize traditional narratives, contributing to the gradual disintegration of communal memory.

2. Fieldwork and Reflexivity: Listening at the Threshold

Before turning to the historical and digital trajectories of Balkan vampire lore, it’s essential to situate the researcher within the story. This study isn’t built solely on archival sources or digital artifacts. It’s rooted in lived experience fieldwork across rural Romania and Serbia, and the emotional cadence of oral transmission. What follows is a reflection from that threshold: between researcher and witness, between tradition and transformation.

I didn’t go to Romania and Serbia just to collect stories. I went to sit with them. To feel the weight of a pause after someone mentioned a name they’d rather not repeat. To watch how a “bunică” stirred her coffee when she spoke of the “strigoi” not as myth, but as memory. Folklore wasn’t something I found in books. It was in the way people moved, remembered, and sometimes refused to speak.

In those villages, I learned that stories don’t just live in words. They live in gestures, in rituals, in the quiet spaces between generations. They didn’t talk about it much. No one needed to. The stake had been driven before the last handful of earth was laid. Not out of anger. Not even fear, really. Just knowing. In some villages, it was hawthorn cut fresh, sharp as memory. In others, iron, cold and deliberate. You pierced the body not to punish, but to keep it quiet. To still dream. To stop the milk from souring, the bread from failing, the animals from falling sick without reason. It wasn’t dramatic. It was just what you did when the signs were there. A quiet ritual, tucked into the edges of mourning. And that’s what made it last.

These rituals, quiet and persistent, shaped not just the stories I heard but the way I came to understand storytelling itself. As a historian and educator, I carry the tension between honoring tradition and translating it for new audiences. In digital spaces, I saw those same stories flicker across screens looped, liked, and often laughed at. The vampire hasn't vanished. It's just wearing a different mask. But something gets lost in the scroll: the weight, the warning, the communal breath behind the tale.

This work is my way of walking that threshold between “bunica’s” firelight and the teenager’s phone glow. Between ritual and remix. My methodology lives in both place and platform, in oral memory and algorithmic drift. I’m not here to mourn folklore’s transformation. I’m here to trace it with care, with reverence, and with the hope that even in pixels, the revenant still speaks.

3. Historical Origins of Vampire Lore

In the year 1725, the quiet village of Kisiljevo fell under a shadow. Not long after the death of a man named Peter Blagojević, neighbors began to perish in strange and sudden ways. Whispers spread like wildfire—some swore Blagojević had returned from the grave, seeking out the living one by one. Fear gripped the village, and the old tales of the restless dead stirred once more. Either out of fear or fear-induced madness, villagers reportedly exhumed the body of Blagojević and, to their horror, found it remarkably well preserved. His mouth was said to drip with fresh blood, and his fingernails and hair appeared to have grown after death. For a small Serbian village in 1725, this would have been a chilling sight—a premonition that Blagojević had not rested in peace, and that something ancient and malevolent had awakened. This encounter marks one of the earliest recorded uses of the term vampire in Western European print, appearing in the *Wienerisches Diarium* in 1725 (Barber 1988, 5). The report on Peter Blagojević’s alleged return from the grave helped introduce the vampire legend into public discourse beyond the Balkans, igniting widespread fascination and fear.

The earliest known whisper of the vampire in written history, however, comes from an Old Russian text dated to A.D. 1047—a time when Orthodox Christianity was just beginning to take root in the Slavic principalities of the Kievan Rus’ and the Byzantine-influenced frontier. The word used was *upir*, a term shrouded in mystery. Some scholars believe it may have meant “the one at the feast” or “the thing at the sacrifice,” hinting at a spiritual presence feared to appear during rituals for the dead (Perkowski 1989, 12). It wasn’t a name spoken lightly. In fact, it may have been a euphemism—a way to avoid calling the creature by its true name, if such a name

ever existed. And that's the haunting part: historians may never uncover what these early communities truly called it, or when the belief first crept into their lives. All that remains is the echo of a word, and the fear it carried.

Based on these accounts—and others like them—vampire beliefs were not dismissed as mere superstition. They were taken seriously by military commanders and medical officials, revealing how folklore could shape policy and public action. Reports of vampirism often led to official interventions: exhumations, staking rituals, and coordinated communal responses driven by fear and tradition (Dundes 1998, 45). In these moments, myth and state power intertwined, and ritual became a tool for confronting the unknown.

Vampiric legends were more than tales of the undead—they were ways to understand death, disease, and the boundaries of social order. In premodern Eastern Europe, unexplained deaths and outbreaks of illness were often attributed to vampiric forces, especially in rural communities lacking formal education and medical knowledge. The term vampire became a scapegoat for disease—a way to externalize fear and impose ritual control. Digging up graves, driving stakes, and performing burial rites weren't simply acts of superstition. They were communal responses—rituals that helped people make sense of death, disease, and disorder. These practices reinforced shared beliefs about purity, boundaries, and what it meant to keep chaos at bay. In that sense, folklore didn't just reflect fear—it offered a kind of remedy. It became both diagnosis and cure, a way for communities to govern the unknown through story and ceremony.

4. Folklore in Transition: Print to Digital

In a quiet, half-forgotten village tucked into the folds of Serbia, I sat across from a *starija žena* (old woman), her hands weathered like the hills behind her home. The steam from our Turkish coffee curled upward, slow and deliberate, as if reluctant to leave the warmth of the morning. She spoke softly, her voice carrying stories of vampires that crept through the night, charms stitched into hems, and warnings whispered between generations. These tales weren't hers alone—they belonged to her *starija baka* (elder grandmother), and to the women before her, passed down like heirlooms too fragile for the modern world.

As she stirred the thick grounds at the bottom of her cup, she paused and looked away. "*Moja unučad* (my grandchildren) don't want to hear these things," she said. "They say it's old." The words hung in the air, heavier than the silence that followed. In that moment, I felt the ache of something deeper than nostalgia rupture in the chain of memory, where folklore once flowed freely between mouths and ears, now stalled by screens and scrolls.

Today, stories like hers compete with the spectacle of TikTok and the bite-sized irony of meme culture. The voices of women like her, living archives of ancestral wisdom, risk being drowned out by the algorithm's churn. But maybe, just maybe, these platforms aren't the end. Maybe they're the beginning of something else. A digital hearth. A pixelated resurrection. What if the stories once told over coffee could find new life in the glow of a screen, not as relics, but as reminders?

Folklore has always followed the path of its storytellers, shifting from spoken word to printed pages, and now to digital screens. In today's cyberworld, these myths and legends are no longer bound by geography or tucked away in libraries never to be seen. These tales travel fast, surfacing in memes, pop culture, and fan fiction—often morphing for new audiences. What was once local and intimate now circulates globally, reshaped by algorithms and remix culture. Yet it still echoes a timeless impulse: to interpret the unknown, to give shape to fear, mystery, and memory. But this very fluidity can also unravel folklore's foundations. Stories once anchored in place and ritual begin to drift, shedding their ancestral gravity and the unsettling truths they once carried.

Yet this very freedom can become folklore's undoing. Stories once rooted in place and purpose begin to drift, shedding their ancestral weight and the eerie truths they once carried. Tales whispered by grandparents as cautionary warnings, thick with dread and moral consequence, are often reimagined to reflect longing rather than fear. The vampire, once a symbol of death, disease, and forbidden lust, now glitters with romantic appeal or emerges as a misunderstood antihero. In the digital age, the haunting becomes aesthetic, and the warning transforms into wish fulfillment.

Though vampire tales long predate him, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) remains the most recognized turning point transforming regional folklore into a fixture of global pop culture. Stoker's portrayal of Count Dracula brought vampires into the modern-day light. It was Stoker's novel that marked this pivotal shift in the evolution of vampire lore, bridging centuries-old folklore with emerging pop culture. Stoker didn't just resurrect the vampire myth; he reimagined it for a world grappling with industrialization, scientific progress, and shifting moral boundaries. His vampire stepped out of the shadowy forests of Eastern Europe and into the gas-lit streets of London, embodying fears of contagion, immigration, and forbidden desire. In doing so, Stoker cast the vampire not merely as a folkloric monster, but as a mirror to modern anxieties.²

² This transformation—from folkloric warning to aesthetic fascination—marks a rupture in ritual cadence. Where once the vampire embodied communal dread and moral consequence, it now flickers as a stylized icon, often stripped of its ethnographic weight. The shift reflects not only changing cultural appetites but also the erosion of oral transmission and place-based memory.

Much of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is owed to Emily Gerard and her 1885 essay *Transylvanian Superstitions*, which offered Western readers a vivid glimpse into the eerie customs of Eastern Europe. Gerard's account introduced terms like *Nosferatu*, a word that though linguistically debated left a lasting imprint on pop culture's portrayal of the vampire. Her descriptions of villagers placing garlic, crucifixes, and wooden stakes around graves to prevent the dead from rising were more than atmospheric details; they became the very rituals that defined vampire mythology in Stoker's novel and beyond. These folkloric practices, once rooted in rural superstition, were reimagined by Stoker as symbolic tools of modern fear blending spiritual anxiety with scientific rationalism. Today, the combined legacy of Gerard and Stoker remains deeply embedded in vampire legend, as enduring and recognizable as the original tales whispered in the shadowed corners of Slavic principalities of the Kievan Rus' and the Byzantine-influenced frontier.³

5. Digital Resurrection: TikTok and Meme Culture

The vampire's folkloric journey didn't end in the gas-lit streets of London. Today, it thrives across TikTok memes, blockbuster films, bestselling novels, binge-worthy TV shows, and the ever-evolving landscape of social media. From stitched videos to cinematic reboots, the myth continues to adapt—reshaped by digital culture and reimagined for new generations. These reinterpretations carry the pulse of oral tradition, transforming the vampire from a dusty literary artifact into a vibrant, evolving symbol of cultural storytelling. From whispered village legends to viral TikTok edits, the vampire has never stopped adapting, always reflecting the anxieties, longings, and metamorphoses of the societies that summon it.

We can follow that journey—tracing the vampire's path from whispered tale to printed archetype to algorithmic feed—revealing how it continues to mirror our most intimate fears and desires. But to understand how the vampire evolves, we must first return to its ancestral soil, where Balkan villagers once whispered tales of restless spirits and blood-drinking revenants, and then follow its transformation into the pixelated avatars and looping memes that populate today's digital landscape.

In today's digital culture, the vampire continues to shapeshift, blending horror with humor, nostalgia, and a wink of social critique. Take TikTok's "vampire check"

³ Gerard's ethnographic lens and Stoker's literary imagination together forged a bridge between rural ritual and modern myth. What began as whispered warnings in village cemeteries became codified symbols of fear—garlic, crucifix, stake—transformed by print and popular culture into global archetypes. In this alchemy, folklore did not vanish; it adapted, carrying ancestral dread into new forms of storytelling.

trend, where users channel gothic flair and dramatic makeup while mouthing Olivia Rodrigo's Vampire—a modern echo of centuries-old themes of seduction, betrayal, and monstrosity, now filtered through Gen Z's aesthetic. Meanwhile, *Twilight* edits flood feeds with ironic reverence, turning Edward Cullen's brooding intensity into a punchline that still somehow honors the myth. Even parody accounts—like thirst traps featuring Count Chocula or stitched clips from *What We Do in the Shadows*—show how the vampire remains endlessly remixable. Its mythic heart beats on, but its costume keeps changing, tailored to the anxieties and amusements of each new generation.

In this digital age, the vampire doesn't merely haunt stories—it beckons, inviting audiences to become co-authors of its myth. Through likes, stitches, duets, and comment threads, users don't just consume vampire lore; they reshape it, remix it, and breathe new life into its ancient veins. A stitched clip might turn brooding into satire, while a duet overlays heartbreak onto gothic longing. These reinterpretations blur the line between folklore and fandom, transforming myth into a living, scrolling dialogue—one that pulses with irony, intimacy, and reinvention.

I've seen this same impulse in the quiet corners of Serbian villages, where elderly women recount tales of the vampir not as static legends, but as living memories—retold, reinterpreted, and adapted to the rhythms of their time. In both spaces—digital and embodied—folklore survives through participation. Scholars like Flinterud (2023) and Buccitelli (2019) suggest that platforms such as TikTok act as cultural agents, subtly steering vernacular traditions through the logic of algorithms. Their insights help frame my reading of TikTok not just as a stage for performance, but as a site of folkloric remix and rupture—where myth is not preserved, but perpetually reborn.

Once, these stories were passed down by “*bunica mea*” (grandmother) in her modest cottage, where the scent of woodsmoke lingered and her weathered face glowed softly in the firelight. Her voice carried the weight of generations, weaving tales that felt older than the hills outside her door. But today, the glow of the smartphone has replaced the flicker of the firelight. *Bunica mea*'s tales haven't disappeared—they've been outpaced. In a world of algorithmic feeds and viral trends, mythmaking has become a collective performance, shaped by irony, aesthetics, and the speed of engagement. The vampire survives not because we remember the old stories, but because we keep reinventing them—one meme, one edit, one duet at a time.

As Azim (2022) notes, digital storytelling during times of crisis often revives traditional narratives in unexpected forms. In this context, meme culture becomes not just parody, but a vessel for communal memory.

6. Public History Implications

This shift from firelight to feed marks both a challenge and an invitation for historians. As traditional storytelling flickers out in places like Transylvania where tales once echoed through Carpathian Mountain villages and candlelit kitchens, folklore finds new life in the digital realm. The smartphone screen becomes a new kind of agora, where myths are no longer passed down by memory alone, but reshaped in real time through likes, loops, and viral trends. But, unlike the static exhibits or printed texts, these platforms are fluid, participatory, and often irrelevant. For historians, this means rethinking interpretation: how do we honor the cultural weight of “*bunica mea*”’s whispered tales, told in her modest cottage with the scent of woodsmoke curling through the air, while engaging audiences who remix myths through memes and duets?

Folklore once thrived in the glow of firelight, intimate, rooted, and passed from voice to voice. Today, it pulses through feeds and hashtags, reshaped by speed and scale. This shift offers historians a rare opportunity: to engage broader audiences while safeguarding the depth of tradition.

Yet with accessibility comes a risk: stories once steeped in ritual and place may lose their texture in digital translation. The challenge is not a choice between reach and authenticity, but a call to craft spaces where both can coexist. As Poole (2022) argues, digital platforms reshape human interaction and vernacular culture, often amplifying folklore while simultaneously flattening its context. In this new agora, we are not merely archivists—we are interpreters of meaning, responsible for ensuring that even the most viral tale retains the echo of its origin.

As folklore drifts from whispered tales by the hearth to viral threads on glowing screens, the keepers of cultural memory, museums, educators, and community historians, step into a more urgent role. These aren’t just curators of objects or dates. They’re caretakers of meaning. In a world where stories risk becoming scrollable content, they offer something slower, deeper: context, continuity, and connection.

Museums become the still points in this swirl of change. Whether through immersive exhibits or digitized archives, they invite us to linger. A well-crafted display doesn’t just present an artifact; it breathes life into it. It honors the hands that shaped it, the voices that carried it, and the communities that still feel its echo. Increasingly, museums are reaching beyond their walls, offering virtual tours and crowdsourced collections that stitch tradition into the fabric of modern technology.

Educators, too, hold the thread. In classrooms and workshops, they help students look past the meme to the myth, past the trend to the tradition. They teach

not just folklore, but how to listen to it—how to ask what a story meant to its teller, and what it might still mean today. In doing so, they turn learners into stewards, not just spectators. As Thompson (2019) and Blank and McNeill (2013) emphasize, folklore education in digital contexts requires not only transmission but interpretation, helping students navigate the tension between vernacular tradition and algorithmic culture.

And then there are the community historians, the quiet archivists of lived experience. Rooted in place and relationship, they gather the stories that slip through the cracks. They host storytelling nights in church basements, record oral histories in kitchen nooks, and build local archives that pulse with the heartbeat of their towns. They are often the first to notice when a tradition begins to fade, and the most determined to keep it alive.

Together, these roles form a kind of cultural scaffolding. They don't just preserve folklore; they help it breathe in new spaces. They remind us that tradition isn't static. It's a choice. A commitment. A living inheritance we carry forward, not just for ourselves, but for the communities yet to come. As Poole (2022) observes, digital and embodied traditions rely on intentional stewardship, where cultural transmission becomes an active, participatory act.

7. Conclusion

Even now, the “strigoï” stirs not in the graveyards of Romania, but in the corners of the internet, where myth is reshaped by pixels and pace. The vampire, once feared in hushed tones and midnight rituals across Serbian villages, now flickers across screens as parody, trope, or trend. But these figures were never just monsters. They were metaphor mirrors held up to the soul of a community to name the unnamable: grief, disease, betrayal.

Folklore is fragile. It does not endure because it is written down. It survives because it is spoken, remembered, felt. When stories lose their setting the ognjište, the funeral vigil, the whispered warning, they risk losing their meaning. In the digital age, memory competes with distraction. Myth becomes meme. Tradition turns into trivia.

During my fieldwork in Eastern Serbia, I also sat with another staramajka who while stirring her coffee slowly, said it plainly “it's the video games”. The grandkids don't ask any more about our history. She didn't sound angry, just tired. Like someone watching the izmiče koren (The root is slipping away). These weren't complaints. They were quiet warnings. The stories once told by the “ognjište” with hands folded, eyes wide, and firelight dancing now flicker behind screens, passed over like noise. Their rhythm is off. Their meaning stretched thin. But in her voice,

the ember still glowed. Not loud. Not desperate. Just steady. Like something old that knows how to wait.

They were warnings—testimonies of a rupture in cultural transmission, where ancestral wisdom risks being drowned out by the algorithm's churn. It's a real and growing concern, documented by folklorists and digital humanists such as Tok Thompson (2019) and Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill (2013), who argue that algorithmic culture prioritizes novelty over authenticity, fragmenting stories and severing them from their lived contexts.

And yet, folklore has always found a way. It outlived empires that tried to rewrite it, regimes that banned it, and borders that split communities apart. In the shadow of Ottoman rule, Serbian guslars still sang their epics by firelight, passing memory from mouth to ear (Wilson 1970). Romanian villagers whispered tales of strigoi even when the Party called it superstition (Kligman 1988). Roma legends traveled in exile, reshaping themselves in new tongues and new lands (Hancock 2002). Folklore didn't just survive—it adapted, resisted, and endured. Because stories, once rooted in the soul of a people, don't vanish. They wait. They evolve. They return.

My hope is that it can survive the algorithm too if we choose to carry it forward with care. That means listening to elders, archiving voices, and creating spaces both physical and digital where stories can breathe again. Museums, educators, and, community historians are not merely preservers of the past. They don't just preserve tradition, they help it breathe again.

To honor folklore is to honor the people who lived it. It is to say: your fears mattered. Your rituals mattered. Your stories still matter. In this way, the vampire walks again not as a meme, but as memory. A memory of the grandmother who salted windowsills in Transylvania, just in case. Of the village priest who buried the dead with stakes, not out of cruelty, but caution.

Of the exile who carried stories across borders, reshaping them in whispers, in blog posts, in borrowed tongues. Of the digital native who stitches old fears into new forms Reddit threads, TikTok rituals, AI-generated lore. The vampire doesn't just haunt the grave. It haunts the archive, the algorithm, the ancestral echo. It walks not to frighten, but to remind that what we bury doesn't always stay buried. And what we forget finds new ways to be remembered. Not as trivia, but as testimony.

To conclude, I offer a brief fieldwork encounter that illustrates how folklore continues to live and speak. One night, returning to Knjaževac after a long day of interviews, I heard the faint cry of a kitten echoing through the dark. It was nothing at first, just a sound. But the next morning, over coffee and quiet conversation, a local elder told me of a curse: that a kitten's cry near the home foretells misfortune. I hadn't asked. She simply offered it, as if the story had been waiting for me. That

moment unplanned, uncanny reminded me that folklore is not just remembered. It is encountered. It lives in the air, in the ground, in the pauses between words. It waits in the shadows, in the sounds, in the stories still whispered. And if we listen closely, it still speaks.

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