At the Bottom of Both Worlds: Hierarchy of Speeches in *Blade* (1998)

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The present work seeks to observe the hierarchy of speeches in the first Blade (1998) movie. Since the black vampire hunter is half human and half vampire, we must analyze its complex existence in both groups. Due to the fact he is a black man, it is possible to see parallels between the existing racial prejudice in the off-screen world and the separation shown in the film. Besides, as a half vampire, he is also considered at the bottom of the vampire world hierarchy. Although he is portrayed as an outcast, living outside the margins of society, Blade is placed at the center of a myth as the one with the power to awaken an ancient vampire god. To understand the paradoxes of Blade's identity, we intend to focus on the power dynamics presented in the movie through the lens of the decolonial studies framework, considering authors such as Achille Mbembe, Denise Ferreira da Silva and Homi Bhabha.

Keywords: *Blade, MCU, Race studies.*

1. Introduction

Among the ten biggest movie box offices, four are comic books adaptations: three movies of the *Avengers* saga (2012, 2018 and 2019) and *Spiderman: no way home* (2021)[3]. To this extent, we can indicate that, as a mass content, those movies have a large reach to the audience. However, it has not always been this way, since it is a very difficult achievement to produce a film based on a story already known and loved by the comic book audience. Pascal Lefèvre describes in his chapter:

> *Few adaptations respect meticulously the storyline of a particular comic. Every real artisan of cinema knows that this medium has its own laws and rules. A direct adaptation is seldom a good choice: some elements may work wonderfully in a comic but cannot function in the context of a film. Usually, a script writer for a movie has to leave out scenes, has to add others, and has to write out some principal characters or introduce new ones.* (Lefèvre 2007, 4)

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[3] Data available in: https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW

Even though it was difficult to translate to the movie screen all the marvellous things portrayed in the comic books, Blade (1998) was sold as an action movie. That genre adaptation and Wesley Snipes starring as the vampire hunter made it successful enough to start a new wave of blockbusters adapted from comic books, since it would gather the action and the comic book public. It demonstrated how vampires, historically seen as villains, could be reconfigured into heroes (Garcia and Cánepa 2022).

> *Marvel did not follow Stan Lee's plan to enter adaptation production. Blade (1998) was the first quality adaptation of a Marvel comic. Based on a supporting character from the 1970s comic book, Tomb of Dracula, the film featured Wesley Snipes as the eponymous half-human/half-vampire character. The film grossed US$70 million in the US and US$61 overseas, making it the twenty-ninth highest-grossing film of 1998 and sixth among R-rated films that year (in the US, the rating requires children under 17 should only watch it with an adult). Two years later, Marvel followed up with X-Men, which grossed $296 million worldwide and had two sequels that each grossed $400 million. The scale of the comic book blockbuster is such that the next two X-Men sequels cost $210 million, and the earnings were a disappointment compared to the first sequel, made for half that amount, and compared to the spectacular success of Spider-Man. 3, made with US$258 million and which earned almost US$900 million worldwide. The astronomical numbers of these films, which were matched by the new cinematic versions of Superman and Batman, created a renewed buzz around comics as products suitable for becoming cinema.* (Gordon 2015, 20)[4]

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[4] From the original: "A Marvel não seguiu o plano de Stan Lee para entrar na produção de adaptações. Blade (1998) foi a primeira adaptação de qualidade de um quadrinho Marvel. Baseado em um coadjuvante do gibi dos anos 1970, Tumba de Drácula, o filme trazia Wesley Snipes como o personagem homônimo meio humano/meio vampiro. O filme arrecadou US$ 70 milhões nos EUA e US$ 61 no mercado estrangeiro, o que fez dele o vigésimo-nono filme de maior arrecadação em 1998 e o sexto entre os filmes de classificação R naquele ano (nos EUA, a classificação exige que menores de 17 anos só o assistam acompanhados de um adulto). Dois anos depois, a Marvel deu continuidade com X-Men, que arrecadou US$ 296 milhões no mundo todo e teve duas sequências que arrecadaram, cada uma, US$ 400 milhões. A escala do blockbuster de quadrinhos é tal que as duas sequências seguintes de X-Men custaram US$ 210 milhões e o ganho foi uma decepção em comparação à primeira sequência, realizada por metade dessa quantia, e em relação ao sucesso espetacular de Homem-Aranha 3, feito com US$ 258 milhões e que rendeu quase US$ 900 milhões pelo mundo. Os números astronômicos destes filmes, que foram equiparados pelas novas versões cinematográficas de Superman e Batman, criaram um "auê" renovado em torno das HQs como produtos propícios para virar cinema." (Gordon 2015, 20)

It is possible to understand that Blade was different from anything else on the market, a black hero, half vampire and vampire hunter. Wesley Snipes was also doing very well as an action actor. Therefore, the movie is responsible for a big change in movie industry. Besides its huge success at the time, we believe that the movie has still other prospects left to be analysed, such as the two social hierarchies presented on the movie.

For this reason, this present work seeks to elevate the relevance of the Blade's movie to the industry of film. In the same way, we intend to comprehend Blade's narrative and the complexity of the character focussing on society and racial studies.

2. Hierarchies

Although Blade's world seems just like ours in the 2000s, it shows the vampire underworld as an addition. If we analyse it as a hierarchy pyramid, we can understand that at the top, as the most respected and in less quantity, there are the creatures that were born as vampires, the members of the House. At the middle, and the easier kind to find, are the ones that got turned into vampires. They differ from the first ones by their rebellious attitude and sensuality and have more to gain with the war since they aspire to become the elite.

During the first half of the movie, it is made clear that the members of the House look down on the turned vampires. Thinking in terms of hybridization, they differ from Blade because they completed the transition, leaving their humanity behind. This is the reason they separate themselves from Blade. Although he is born already into this duality, a hybrid all along, he refuses to join the vampire world. It is obvious from his journey to find a cure that, if he could, he would be only human – until he embraces both of his sides in the end of the movie, becoming the hero.

At last, at the bottom of our imaginary pyramid, we have the lonely Daywalker. Even though he has vampire powers such as being stronger, faster and has the thrust for blood, he can walk during the daylight and age. For this reason, he occupies a grey area, seen both as a mythological and inferior being. Beyond the singularities of a half vampire hero, there are fundamental aspects of Blade related to his human side.

Being a black man, the character can be looked at through a racial perspective, bringing forward some of the traits that make him so unique. In this sense, we must comprehend the hierarchy of the human world. The author Michel Foucault (2010) establishes the concept of biopower which demonstrates the flow of power through society based on the separation of the sovereignty and the population. The sovereign would be those in power to decide who lives and who dies in their system.

Based on that concept, Achille Mbembe wrote *Necropolítica [Necropolitics]* (2018) because he understood that, to keep this system working, racism must exist, which he explained by three aspects of society. First, the territorialization: the sovereign will have the best location in the space and will keep the rest of the population in places where they will not be safe. Next, the politics: the people in power will make laws that keep the rest of the population with fewer rights. At last, the war power, which means the black population will be hunted and killed to maintain the imaginary of prejudice in society alive.

These complexities and apparent inconsistencies are historically present in how black people are seen: savage and obedient; sexual and innocent; mystical, primitive and educated (Bhabha 1998, 126). Connected to the colonial dualities attributed to black people is the need to show excellence. Apart from his fighting skills, Blade demonstrates an urge to prove his worth and redeeming himself for being who he is – a monster, in his perspective – by being constantly ready to sacrifice himself.

Another layer that can be related to this urge is a brief but important scene that shows the audience his room, early in the movie, when the character is established as an intelligent and deep man. In addition to the wall of weapons, Blade has many books, a chess table and a meditation space. The apprehension of these well-established knowledge tools represents Blade's need to belong in the body/mind dialectic, restricted to those who fit in the modern ideals.

Black people are not part of this conceptualization since the racial constructs inscribed them into belatedness, the idea that they are temporally displaced, primitive and tied to a past that does not allow "progress" (Bhabha 1998). It also symbolizes the moral difference between he and the other vampires, even though he is an outcast and they are the ones with true power in this society.

The reason turned vampires hate Blade is simple to understand since he is their hunter. Meanwhile, in the human world we see different connections through the movie. An example of that is Blade's friend that treats him like a brother, also a black man. They seem to see each other with the perspective they are equal, and they welcome each other.

There is a specific scene where is possible to observe even more his complex human connections. For that, we must remember the beginning of the movie when Blade's mother, a black woman, is hurt in a hospital full of white doctors that help her to give birth, but she does not survive. In a contrasting way, Blade as an adult gets into a hospital and sees a black doctor who was hurt by a vampire. He tries to save her, and the police man started shooting at him, ignoring the burnt vampire. He

shows compassion to the hurt doctor, and they get along for the rest of the movie, meanwhile the police (the war power) will shoot him without questions.

Alongside Blade, our vampire hunter trying to save the world, there is Abraham Whistler. He is Blade's father figure, an old white man who hates vampires and saved Blade from being out of guidance – we can analyse this relationship as one example of the white savior, the representation of a lost black person being saved by the white saint. The other component of the big trio of the movie is Doctor Karen Jenson, a hematologist smart enough to create the cure to prevent anyone becoming a vampire – this character breaks up with a few black woman's stereotypes, some of them discussed by Grada Kilomba in *Memórias da Plantação [Plantation Memories]* (2019) like the fact that black women are severely sexualized and institutional racism, which is about how the work market does not allow black people to achieve big carriers.

At another point in the representational spectrum is Blade's mother. Vanessa Brooks is presumed dead throughout Blade's life, and he blames himself for being part of her death, only to discover she was turned into a vampire. While Doctor Karen is breaking stereotypes, Vanessa is portrayed as a sensual woman, her motherhood used as an artifice to capture Blade for the villainy ritual. According to Hortense Spillers (1987, 80), although the female is marked by denial and a certain illegitimacy, the black American male was "the infant child who bears the life against the could-be fateful gamble, against the odds of pulverization and murder", and this is made clear from Blade's trajectory. Despite being away from Blade for his entire life until then, the idea of Vanessa was enough to serve as a moral guide, while her son fought against the vampire world and seeked revenge, being a constant presence for him.

Although Blade's deepest relations are with humans, they have no real part in the secret war. Humankind is seen by the vampires as cattle, and Blade is the connection point between these two realities. That is why we can understand Blade as the bottom of both worlds. In the vampire world he is hated by all the layers, just like in the human world due to the fact he is a black man. And the irony is that he is essential to both systems, he is the one who can save the vampire world and humanity.

3. The monster and the hero

Vampires are known throughout history as seductive monsters, as Garcia points out in his book about its complex existence and how society deals with it.

> *Man's difficulty in dealing with his violent nature makes us create characters that take on this side. The vampire is our Mr. Hyde, our Doppelgänger (double), he serves as a scapegoat for our drives. We see our image reflected in it. We have a relationship of attraction and repulsion*. (Garcia 2014, 28)[5]

A vampire is a monster who carries all the dark wishes of society, he is feared by that at the same time he is intriguing. The author Fátima Oliveira (2003) comprehends the monster as a marginalized individual, a person out of place by elements such as gender, race, or sexuality. In that regard, we should remind that Blade is a black half vampire, so he is a double monster.

The vampire hunter knows he is out of place, and for that he tries by all costs not to become the full monster. For an example, he does not drink blood, so he buys inputs of a chemical formula to drink instead of blood to feel fulfilled, that must be his big move to not become a vampire monster. If we look further, we can take different elements pointed above to understand how he runs from black stereotypes, such as the fact he is super smart and extremely good in everything he tries, like martial arts. Until our protagonist reaches a point where he fails at not being the monster.

As it was established, Blade is seen as a monster due to his double displacement (Garcia and Cánepa 2022, 3): he escapes the villainy historically attributed to vampires and, at the same time, challenges the white hegemony in heroes' narratives. Considering this unprecedented place he occupies, the narrative nuances leave doubts as to whether Blade is the enemy or the salvation to the vampire world.

At the beginning of the movie, Blade's goal is to kill vampires and end the secret ongoing war between vampires and humankind. Trained by a vampire hunter and fighting to control his own vampire side, he seeks those at the top of the hierarchy and the one vampire responsible for his mother's death. However, once the Book of Erebus – the vampire bible – is translated and an ancient prophecy is revealed, it is made clear that Blade's blood is the key to bring back La Magra to life.

Although he is placed as the chosen one in the prophecy, an essential character in the ritual, his role was to be a sacrifice, not the vessel for the deity. Being a black man, there is a parallel between his function as a disposable body and some discussions in decolonial studies. The distinction made by Hortense Spillers (1987) between body and flesh illustrates why Blade was left to die in the ritual, transformed into a source of power for others. The body is connected to social conceptualizations, and the flesh refers to a person made captive, the primary narrative (Spillers 1987, 67).

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[5] From the original: "A dificuldade do homem lidar com sua natureza violenta faz com que criemos personagens que assumam esse lado. O vampire é o nosso Mr. Hyde, nosso Doppelgänger (duplo), serve como um bode expiatório para nossas pulsões. Nós vemos nossa imagem refletida nele. Possuímos uma relação de atração e repulsão." (Garcia 2014, 28)

Despite him always being ready to risk his life to save others, his role in the ritual is a symbol of exploitation. Both situations are sacrifices, but this time he is just flesh – or blood. He is not there for who he is, but for what he is: the ideal hybrid. The instrumentalization of hybrids or mixed races is vastly debated in Denise Ferreira da Silva's work. According to her research, racial subjugation enables the logic of obliteration, where the Other is in a trajectory towards annihilation, due to its intrinsic affectability, since the Other cannot access universality and self-determination, attributes of the modern subject (Silva 2022).

In the logic of obliteration, the Other is not excluded, but engulfed – "a modern scientific construct whose role is to reveal how the 'empirical' is but a moment of the 'transcendental'" (Silva 2001, 423). That is why Blade is not completely excluded from the vampire world, staying somewhere between the salvation and the enemy. Although his role is to be obliterated, he is fundamental to the trajectory of La Magra.

To save the world and stop the ritual, Blade must drink blood. Against all his efforts to not become a monster he drinks the doctor's blood, without killing her. Beyond the fact that he broke one of his rules, the way that the scene is produced sexualizes him, the camera dolly in and out the image of Blade shirtless sucking the doctor's neck with the sound of them moaning. Grada Kilomba (2019) adverts that black people are sexualized and objectified, and by that scene it is comprehensible that Blade became the full monster, the stereotyped picture.

Afterwards, the vampire hunter saves the world by embracing his dualities, so he becomes the hero. If we put it on a timeline, we watch the narrative of a protagonist who transforms into a monster to become a hero. By those facts we can understand the complexity of this character, a black man who broke several imaginaries barriers of who can be considered a hero.

4. Final thoughts

Over 25 years after its premiere, *Blade* (1998) remains relevant due to the impact it had as a comic book adaptation and specifically for its defiance to the imaginary around both heroes and vampires. Overcoming the European and white ideals, the main character and the film are representational milestones, portraying a journey through identification and towards self-acceptance in the form of an action movie.

In this article, we analyzed the social and racial nuances presented in the narrative through a theoretical framework that go back to the colonial mechanisms of hierarchization and obliteration. Far from a finalized discussion, this research seeks to collaborate with debates about social injustices and prejudices still faced today and often represented by cultural productions.

As it was shown, Blade is at the bottom of both social pyramids, although he is essential to both constructions. Fighting through guilt and pain, he places himself as the gatekeeper that keeps humankind safe, and, at the end, embraces his duality as the Daywalker, refusing to let go of either one of his sides. As an unique being, he still feels like an outcast, but chooses to keep fighting to protect the collective.

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