

Vampiric Episteme and the Reconfigurations of the Cinematographic Vampire

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We seek to analyze the reconfigurations of the vampire in contemporary cinema. However, our aim is not mapping this phenomenon, but underlining some examples of the most blockbuster Hollywood productions and focusing (above all) in an analysis of a vampiric episteme that can reflect the characteristics and ability of this being to adapt to the new desires of the public and society. In a vast history of representations, the vampire has encompassed an interesting multiplicity, with a variation of readings of his sociopolitical and cultural metaphors. In this way, it is possible to identify the transformation of this classic Gothic villain into contemporary appearances that dialogue with our new desires and needs. Nowadays, our current experiences proposals that cast these personas through heroic figures in different narrative arcs that are not limited to just the horror genre.

Keywords: *vampire, reconfigurations, cinema*

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to analyze some contemporary cinematic reconfigurations of the vampire. We understand the character in multiple ways, with different possible readings of his countless sociopolitical and cultural metaphors. Here, we will investigate the reverberation of this figure in the contemporary scene and how this monster (or perhaps now hero and/or humanized persona?) has adapted to the new desires and imagery needs of our current subjectivity.

In current popular culture, certain themes seem to gain greater prominence and the Hollywood film industry – as well as productions from other aspects and geographic spaces – are focusing on new agendas addressing minority issues, new identity visibilities, pointing out political structures of power, both private and public etc. The representation of the superhero, in this case, becomes one of the most pertinent examples of the Hollywood industry, where the popularity of films based

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on comic books seems to follow a tendency to explore new ways of displacing a hegemonic imaginary with productions such as *Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins, 2017), *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018), *Captain Marvel* (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2019), *Wonder Woman 1984* (Patty Jenkins, 2020), *Black Widow* (Cate Shortland, 2021) etc.

With this brief example, it is possible to identify a greater mainstream concern with the representation of minority groups². In a marketing consequence that reflects a changing in public demand, the variation in the figure of the hero in these movies begin to achieve greater repercussions with major box office successes. These productions indicate a new opening of space for greater representation in the cinematographic market³. Thus, in a long tradition of male, white, North American, heterosexual and cisgender protagonists (in relation to a framework of references of capitalist, Eurocentric, and Judeo-Christian origin, already more crystallized by our Western culture), the possible reconfigurations that some films present in this more mainstream context demonstrate an interesting paradigm shift in popular media. Horror cinema seems to dialogue with this current trend, and present films that have been called post-horror – a term popularized by critic Steve Rose, in 2017.

This curious terminology seems to present some issues that call for a brief explanation. The proposed post-horror nomenclature implies several problems, such as the difficulty of identifying, through aesthetic, thematic or narrative characteristics, what emerges as innovative in stories that have been categorized as a genre since the Gothic novel and have already undergone a wide variety of renovations and experiences (aesthetic, thematic and narrative) over the years. However, despite a certain limitation that the term presents (especially in its enormous lack of a greater definition of the concept), we realize that the horror genre also has a current interest in exploring the debate about representation and diversity that the film industry, in general, seems to understand as a necessary demand for the contemporary public. Jordan Peele – whose interest in the debate on racial issues is always among the main elements of his works – has enormous visibility in current Hollywood horror cinema, despite still having only three feature films as director: *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019) and *Nope* (2022). In addition to the filmmaker's ability to develop films of the genre with good critical and public reception, the central theme of his stories also seems to find an interesting

² For methodological purposes, we use this concept based on the 4 basic characteristics that Muniz Sodré (2005) identifies: (1) Legal-social vulnerability; (2) Identity *in status nascendi*; (3) Counter-hegemonic struggle; (4) Discursive strategies.

³ Obviously, this issue also brings up the idea of a commodification of certain agendas, as can be seen in the essays on Woke Capitalism by Sharon van Tine (2021) and Akane Kanai and Rosalind Gill (2020).

resonance with certain desires and needs of our contemporary subjectivity, becoming a kind of authorial trademark.

Similar to the transformations in the horror genre, we realize that the figure of the vampire also passes through similar changes – having been consolidated in Gothic literature and experiencing a range of films that went through the same remodeling and experiences. However, the emblematic change in the character's predominance in horror to an increasing appearance in a variety of other narrative arcs, may also indicate a difficulty in inserting this monster as a central metaphorical figure of the genre today, giving space for an appearance in new cinematographic proposals. The scope of this article does not seek to identify all possible reinterpretations of the vampire persona in our contemporary imagination, but to investigate elements that contribute to this new configuration as a more humanized character, protagonist and/or superhero – the latter, in an interesting resonance with a blockbuster film trend of recent years⁴.

Our aim is not to indicate a total emptying of the character as a villain in several stories, but an interesting remodeling where the greater audience reach occurs through new proposals outside the standard classically established by cinema. To achieve this, instead of seeking a mapping of these countless modifications, we propose an investigation of a kind of vampiric episteme – that is, multiple metaphorical characteristics that the character embraces and how this process adapts to the new contemporary scenario. Next, we will demonstrate some more popular examples of this filmic vampire and make some articulations about this new aspect. This text proposes, above all, to understand how this being that is found in our cultural imagination adapts to the new desires of a public inserted in a different perspective on the notions of otherness, monster and other.

2. Vampiric Episteme

The figure of the vampire is endowed with a range of possible interpretations and analyses. We can indicate in its more psychoanalytic bias, issues such as sexuality, violence and repressed desires as essential in the conception of this being. In *Das Unheimlich* (1996)⁵, Sigmund Freud indicates unconscious attraction with the variation between difference and similarity in human otherness with the idea of strange. This important element allows an initial understanding of some central elements of our relationship with horror and the figure of the monster. Here, the

⁴ I analyze this contemporary trend in my paper *Transposições Fílmicas de Histórias em Quadrinhos: Uma teorização da relação entre duas linguagens* (2021).

⁵ In this text, we use the version in Portuguese *O Estranho* (1996).

vampiric persona has a certain interesting possibility of interpretation, becoming a prominent being in this binary between similarity and difference. Through our scopic drive, we perceive the inevitable attraction to a seductive and hypnotic creature, as well as the feeling of fear and repulsion due to its predatory violence.

José Luiz Aidar and Márcia Maciel (1986) present a symbiotic relationship between vampire and prey. With a brief presentation of the vampiric persona through its mythical origins, literary characterizations and cinematic reconfigurations, they articulate a bold metaphorical proposal through an appropriation of terminologies incubus and succubus. Their idea is not to follow the Latin etymology of the terms or their mythological presence that refers to the dream state, sexual drives and the duality between male and female. The authors focus on describing the state of dependence between the person who sucks the blood (or the energy and the possible psychoanalytic metaphors included) and his victim, based on the theories of Argentine psychiatrist and psychoanalyst José Bleger (1977).

In general, it is possible to understand monsters as a figure of modern humanist otherness. In a Eurocentric philosophy that perceives the human as a standard of man, white, European, the idea of another implies sociopolitical notions about issues of gender, identity and sexuality and xenophobia towards the different⁶. In this scope, the vampire is a creature endowed with broad interpretative possibilities. Both through a more Freudian psychoanalytic bias and through studies that have a more sociopolitical nature, such as those by Ken Gelder (2001) and Matthew Gibson (2006). It is also important to remember its impact in approaching a debate of a more socioeconomic nature, where its narrative formulation within the nobility, implies one of its most famous metaphors: the aristocratic predator sucking the blood of the people (obviously, of lower purchasing power). Here, the approach to Karl Marx's (1967) idea of "class struggle" is inevitable.

In a way, the field of horror has as its central element the relationship between humans and their most intrinsic issues. In addition to an approach to sociopolitical and cultural themes – as we can see in the criticism of capitalism and extreme consumerism in George A. Romero's zombies or in the recent cinematic forays, mentioned above, by director Jordan Peele –, the genre establishes its relationship with a primordial sensation, fear. In the words of H. P. Lovecraft (1929): "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."

Horror emerges as a human sensation before its more organized establishment as a genre. Its first narrative manifestations are seen through religion, mythology, superstitions, and folklores. Its most ordered configuration would only occur in the

⁶ For more details, see Mbembe (2014) and Sodr  (2017).

Gothic novel, which dealt with issues of its time, marked by the dualism between Enlightenment and Christianity (Carroll 1990, 54-56). In this sense, the themes of death and the unknown (marked by the influence of Catholic dogmas on the notion of the supernatural) stood out among its most prominent themes. "Gothic horror constructed also its understanding of death within this wider humanistic vision and the Judeo-Christian coordinates from which that vision arose." (Stone 2001)

Thus, the most primal human expressions are configured in a genre, already attesting, since its beginning, its importance as a tool of alterity of an era, distorting the tenuous line between the religious and scientific domains as a way of explaining the world. With Western modernism, the theocentric perspective gave way to anthropocentric thinking and the advent of the Gothic novel demonstrated an interesting resonance with its time. If explanations for the world and its mysteries become a function of science and its empirical rationality, the modification of a horror originating from mythical narratives and legends and folklores to an artistic medium showed a new duality between Gothic literature and the Enlightenment. However, a reformulation of the characteristics of horror began to emerge. Religion abandoned its position of presenting human knowledge to become a way of salvation against evil in the fictional universe. The case of the vampire becomes very emphatic when we analyze the main tools used to combat the monster: crucifixes, holy water, or the church itself as a holly space.

These modifications also allow for new possibilities to discover other ways to explore horror. While mythology is based on a certain narrative fixity that has a dogmatic basis with little possibility of changing and stories that are repeated with the intention of serving as an ethical and moral code, arts can pass through varied experiences and reconfigurations. Our contemporary society has also gone beyond this aspect, demonstrating a scenario that Zygmunt Bauman (2001) highlights as liquid modernity, with consumption practices and relational forms (and the construction of our subjectivity) in a more fluid and ephemeral way. Perhaps, the appropriation of this concept to the universe of arts implies understanding a process of constant breakdown of structural solidity for greater experimental expansion.

Among the components of this solidity, we can perceive religious dogmatism and the very institutions that propagate it as one of its most basic foundations – finding a resonance with Foucault's (1987) surveillance and punishment devices, where the idea of structure also refers to the configuration of an instrumentation of power. Taking this idea for the discursive and storytelling element, for example, this fixity and power authority of mythical discourse is reconfigured into a literary creative flexibility. "Art has a timeless speech (although situated), the speech of the absolute and, in this sense, it goes beyond the contingencies of flow. But time can

be measured in the incessant flow of reality and included in the understanding of change and Baumanian liquidity.” (Sá 2014, 118)⁷

With this experimental narrative breadth that the arts allow, the mythical domain ceases to be the only causative or redeeming element in horror. Soon, science itself would have its role in Gothic narratives. In *Dracula* (Stoker 2011), the group that fights the vampire is marked by people from wide areas of Enlightenment bourgeois professionalism – doctors, teachers/scientists, lawyers, etc. – and by the massive use of various forms of communication technologies as a form of recording and understanding the enemy. Friedrich Kittler demonstrates in his essay *Dracula’s Legacy* (1997) how this use has a central importance in history, with technological means and science becoming the great weapon used to defeat the vampire in Bram Stoker’s book.

With science becoming part of horror stories, we see this curious relationship appearing at a time of vindication of the concept of truth. Now, it would be discovered through the empirical exercise of observation and the methodological description to confirm hypotheses. Meanwhile, religion worked as the dichotomy in which knowledge is not proven but accepted by faith. In these horror stories, the idea of salvation also has new forms of understanding. Obviously, salvation has a religious connotation – and it passed through the mythical narrative as a moral and ethical indication of a redemptive action. In this sense, according to Agamben (2007), there is a curious separation of the domains of the divine and the mundane through the terms sacred and profane. “And if consecrating (*sacrare*) was the term that designated things leaving the sphere of human rights, profaning, in turn, meant returning them to the free use of men.” (Agamben 2007, 65)⁸

The theorist indicates religious salvation through the idea of the sacred, or of consecrating. Here, it would be the manifestation of a transition from the mundane to the divine. While profaning would imply dissociating a divine element from its sacred sphere to the human and worldly domain. In parallel to Agamben’s proposal (whose focus is the understanding of a certain social functioning), the narrative reconfiguration that the Gothic allows implies salvation through science – as a maintenance of the social status quo. In *Dracula*, for example, the men of the Enlightenment and modern technologies restore the natural and social order that the vampire threatened to destroy.

⁷ Our translation of “A arte tem uma fala sem tempo (embora situada), a fala do absoluto e, nesse sentido, ultrapassa as contingências do fluir. Mas pode-se dimensionar o tempo no fluir incessante da realidade e inclui-lo na compreensão da mudança e da liquidez baumaniana.” (Sá, 2014, 118)

⁸ Our translation of “E se consagrar (*sacrare*) era o termo que designava a saída das coisas da esfera do direito humano, profanar, por sua vez, significava restituí-las ao livre uso dos homens.” (Agamben, 2007, 65)

In a curious reverberation, however, science also presents itself as a possible threat in horror stories (in this sense, the iconic character of the mad scientist becomes, perhaps, the most emblematic example). From this greater freedom in developing how horror manifests itself, literature (and cinema) develops broad narrative possibilities. While mythology linked horror to the supernatural component, the structuring of the genre inserts this element into various human possibilities. Individual perversions and thoughts present possibilities for transgression between people – something frequently used in slasher cinema and/or torture porn. Despite these changes, the genre's dialogue with the fears and desires of a given time and place remain present, demonstrating a symptomatic relationship between horror and society. "In wrestling with the multitude of social and psychological contradictions, Horror reveals its immanent content, the hidden Utopianism of its negative Romanticism." (Buhle 1976, 121)

Horror presents itself not only as a genre, but also as a way of thinking about our society or life itself in a more philosophical nature, as seen in the works of Eugene Thacker (2011), Dylan Trigg (2014) and Peter Wessel Zapffe (1993). Furthermore, it became common to use horror writers like H. P. Lovecraft to develop various philosophical proposals. We can point out as examples, the brief use of Deleuze and Guattari in *Mille Plateaux* (1995)⁹, Graham Harman's (2011) proposals to think of the author as a type of theorist who would exemplify speculative realism and his methodological proposal of the "object-oriented ontology" or Fabián Ludueña Romandini (2013) who lists Lovecraft as an innovative mythographer.

In this sense, the vampire becomes a being with a certain prominence in possible theoretical articulations. This multiplicity of investigative perspectives occurs for a series of reasons already mentioned, as well as its popularity in our contemporary culture. "We cannot forget that the vampire is precisely the one who opposes the natural order of the world." (Felinto 2010, 141)¹⁰

The monster as an understanding of social structures and identity conceptions also presents its investigative bias in the communication field, as Regis attests: "The category of monster is linked to the processes of constructing identities and cultural differences" (2003, 23)¹¹. Regis' argument finds resonance in the work of Ieda Tucherman (1999), who highlights the configuration of the notion of body in the West made through the conception of otherness and the idea of monstrosity as a deviant characteristic – therefore contrary to the normative standard and

⁹ Here we use the Portuguese version *Mil Platôs* (1995)

¹⁰ Our translation of "Não se pode esquecer que o vampiro é precisamente aquele que se opõe a ordem natural do mundo." (Felinto, 2010, 141)

¹¹ Our translation of "A categoria de monstro se articula aos processos de construção de identidades e diferenças culturais." (Regis, 2003, 23)

established as an imaginary representation of the human body. We even find perspectives on moral issues in certain social structures, paying attention not only to the corporeal element, but above all to behavioral codes. "In this way, the monstrous presents a deviation in moral character. By signaling the threshold between the civilized and the unknown – the unnameable –, the monster also presents itself with a didactic function." (Felinto and Santaella 2012, 85)¹²

The vampire, however, has in its form an articulation of a more privileged place, being studied in its psychoanalytic and social bias in works such as *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995) by Nina Auerbach or in several possible metaphors, as pointed out throughout the text. In Brazil, Diego Paleólogo (2015) highlights the deviant character and sociopolitical resistance in a brief mapping of the vampire persona in media and Lúcio Reis Filho (2016) points out parallels between different versions of *I Am Legend* and *30 Days of Night*, highlighting the tenuous line that separates the scientific and supernatural bias of these beings, indicating American sociopolitical issues that reverberated in the creation of North American suburban gothic.

The centrality of a more sociopolitical debate – where minority issues gain prominence among one of the main current agendas – is in evidence not only in popular culture but also with a growing identification of the importance in academic debate. If Foucault's proposal (1987, 2000, 2008) sought to unveil certain layers of knowledge in search of an understanding of the conditions of possibility for the construction of certain epistemes, historical narratives and power structures, the rhizomatic methodology of Deleuze and Guattari (1995) demonstrated the complexity behind understanding phenomena – in contrast to what the author identified as an arborescent perspective. Obviously, we still find ourselves in a terrain that indicates the centrality of male, white and European theorists. However, we see here an interesting possibility of demonstrating a hegemonic form that dominates the formation of the academic area, as well as the possibility of exploring the perspectives of these authors deconstructing this same hegemony – however, still in a more embryonic process and less directed to the specificities of current issues.

The popularity of Cultural Studies in current academia attests to the importance of the minority theme in communication research (Escosteguy 2010). Through an inheritance of Gramsci's conception of hegemony and counter-hegemony, this perspective recognizes the need for constant negotiation between these two spheres, allowing for a variation in the mediatic production (Mattelart and Mattelart 2012, 108). In this negotiation, we find space for the appearance of difference and the theme of representation gains importance as a cultural product.

¹² Our translation of "Desse modo, o monstruoso apresenta um desvio de caráter moral. Ao sinalizar o limiar entre o civilizado e o desconhecido – o inominável –, o monstro se apresenta também com uma função didática." (Felinto e Santaella, 2012, 85)

Stuart Hall (2000), one of its greatest exponents – as well as a black and Jamaican researcher – dedicates his efforts to the formation of a research center focused on an approach to minority groups and investigations into the conception of cultural identity in our society.

Despite being a perspective that emerged in England, still demonstrating a Eurocentric epistemic protagonism, we realize that these approaches that focused on debates that deconstructed a hegemonic centralization of power between the 1950s and 1980s, have a strong importance today. In a more contemporary scenario, certain names are revitalized, while others gain space in a process that seems to demonstrate a greater interest in issues related to issues such as colonialism, racism, and sexism. For example, we have the notable popularity of names such as Achille Mbembe (2014; 2016), Judith Butler (2018), Bell Hooks (2019), Grada Kilomba (2019), Lélia Gonzalez (1982, 1984, 2021) Paul Beatriz Preçado (2011)¹³, Djamila Ribeiro (2017), among others.

Thus, we realize that the direction towards understanding this phenomenon in Hollywood film production can indicate issues that directly dialogue with the construction of a wide-ranging cultural imaginary. On the one hand, this investigative delimitation implies a continuous perpetuation of a look at the hegemonic field (undoubtedly, Hollywood still reflects a rich, capitalist and neo-imperialist structure with a long history of perpetuating a heterosexual, cisgender, Eurocentric and Jewish-patriarchal pattern). Christian)¹⁴. However, what interests us, in this case, is to understand this place as the production of a symbolic imaginary that has massive reverberations.

The vampire is a creature of great popularity in the contemporary imagination. This success can be credited, above all, to its impregnation in the most varied film productions. Throughout our cinema history, Dracula was one of the most seen literary characters in cinema (Garcia 2014). This breadth of cinematic reconfigurations of various vampiric personas enabled broad metaphorical experiences, as in *Blood for Dracula* (Paul Morrissey, 1974), *The Addiction* (Abel Ferrara, 1994) and *The Wisdom of Crocodiles* (Po-Chih Leong 1998).

However, this metaphorical power of the vampire and its polysemic breadth seem to be passing through a postmodern identity crisis. A certain reconfiguration

¹³ The text cited dates from the period in which the theorist still signed as Beatriz Preçado – which may indicate a difference with his current name, Paul Beatriz Preçado. We chose to maintain the theoretician's current name because we understand that this modification is the way in which Preçado prefers to be recognized today and because we believe that consultation of his material remains accessible, despite the difference in name.

¹⁴ In this regard, Mark Fisher's (2009) book is interesting, demonstrating that capitalism adapts to any scenario. Even counter-hegemonic (and even anti-capitalist) agendas can become interesting profit material and a tool for hegemonic maintenance of the system.

of its imagery and its meanings presents itself as an intrinsic characteristic of this being if we think from a historical perspective of its representations. Thus, since its beginnings within mythical and folkloric narratives spread across a variety of cultures, we have a constant modification of this chameleon-like character.

3. Contemporary vampires in cinema

It is possible to state, without any exaggeration, that the vampire, as we know it, is a cinematographic product. Its more classical representation does not dialogue with the mythical and/or folkloric or even literary descriptions. When we think about the vampiric image, our imagination is driven, above all, to films that addressed this theme – specially, the Dracula movies. We think about the figures of *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau 1922) and the versions of *Dracula* by Bela Lugosi (Tod Browning 1931) and Christopher Lee (Terence Fisher, 1958), as we pointed out in my previous study (Garcia, 2021). Bram Stoker's vampire, despite his popularity in film imagery, is described in a completely different way in the book that originated him (Garcia 2014)

Claude Lecouteux (2005) provides a historiographical survey that traces the possible origins of the vampire. Through a myriad of legends, folklores and mythical narratives that dialogue with some even more sparse vampiric characteristics, it is possible to perceive, only through literature, a greater and more targeted descriptive delimitation. The Gothic novel plays a central role at this time, with the main publications about this being appearing all in the same century: *The Vampire* (John William Polidori, 1819), *Carmilla* (Sheridan Le Fanu, 1872) and *Dracula* (Bram Stoker, 1872) 1897). However, it is only in the audiovisual that its reconfiguration reaches greater power and prevalence in contemporary culture.

Its reverberation can be found in a wide range of media, mainly referring to its audiovisual representation, as pointed out in the interesting study by Lúcio De Franciscis dos Reis Piedade (2012) on Dracula in Brazilian comic books. In an interesting curiosity, Stoker's book was published for the first time in 1897, two years after the supposed invention of cinema: 1895¹⁵. However, its first transposition would only appear in 1921 with the Hungarian production *Drakula* (Rhodes, 2010). Despite the mythical origin of the vampire, present in different cultures through different forms of representation, this being still did not have a clearer delimitation

¹⁵ Highlighting a specific date on the invention of cinema is a source of frequent dispute, given that it is a moving image experience being carried out in several countries around the world. Although 1895 is best known as the beginning, with the famous projection by the Lumière brothers, other forms of experiences considered cinematographic were already being made around the world. For more details, see: Costa (2005).

of its characteristics, as seen in the research by Lecouteux (2005). It is only through its massive use in audiovisual that its greatest power and impregnation in contemporary culture is achieved.

Currently, the popular imagination has a strong presence of the vampire with an aesthetic inherited from films. As previously pointed out, the most monstrous representations have a strong influence from F. W. Murnau's expressionist creation in *Nosferatu* (1922), played iconically by Max Schreck, Bela Lugosi's incarnation in *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) presents the most seductive conception and aristocratic of the predator – which would also become the most popular. The vampire, as a persona of extreme sexualization that the film industry (undeniably patriarchal) explored in its most sensual aspect, has a strong relationship with the representations of Dracula's widows in its various versions, and Gloria Holden in *Dracula's Daughter* (Lambert Hillyer, 1936) and Ingrid Pitt in *The Vampire Lovers* (Roy Ward Baker, 1970) and *Countess Dracula* (Peter Sasdy, 1971).

In a contemporary context, permeated by an infinite number of images, we perceive the audiovisual medium as a constant form of representation of this emblematic figure. The vampire seems to be passing through a certain domestication of his monstrosity with a modification of his villainous character towards other proposals. In 2005, the popularity of Stephanie Meyer's best-seller already seemed to indicate a new trend when using the figure of the vampire to write a novel that promoted Mormon values in its narrative. The story reached cinemas with the films *Twilight* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2008), *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* (Chris Weitz, 2009), *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse* (David Slade, 2010), *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn - Part 1* (Bill Condon, 2011) and *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2* (Bill Condon, 2012).

While the vampire brought a disruptive potential in its representations, the novel and the films in the franchise mentioned above reversed the process, presenting a family of vampires attached to certain conservative values and the restoration of traditional morality. In this way, we perceive an extreme reconfiguration in the character who loses his metaphorical capacity for deconstructing hegemonic models and presenting a notion of radical otherness for a being standardized in antiquated customs and outdated (and obviously questionable) ethical codes.

Despite the popularity of the franchise, we cannot reduce the reconfiguration of its figure to just one case. But if we analyze the most famous recent Hollywood representations, we notice a lack of a vampire with a greater presence as a villain. The recent *The Last Voyage of the Demeter* (André Øvredal, 2023), for example,

which focused on Dracula's journey by ship to England, failed at the box office¹⁶. Even with different proposals as *Renfield* (Chris McKay, 2023), a hybrid of comedy, action and horror – with Nicolas Cage playing an evil but comical version of the villain based on Lugosi – achieved similar marketing results¹⁷. Meanwhile, bets like *What We Do In The Shadows* (Taika Waititi, 2014) boosted the career of the New Zealand director Taika Waititi – who is now responsible for blockbusters in the *Thor* franchise (2017-2022), for example. The movies reduced budget had a commercial and critical repercussion and resulted in a television series version, on FX and Hulu, which started in 2019 and is heading towards its 6th season.

These quick examples do not serve to confirm the absence of the vampire as a villain in narratives – as a large number of films continue to explore this theme. However, it is noticeable that, as a marketing product, changes in its representation seem to yield more financially and achieve greater audience reach in the contemporary scenario. The mainstream spotlight seems to be more interested in reconfiguring this figure than in maintaining a fixity around its role in narrative arcs.

Although the *Twilight* franchise is the biggest financial success among these cases, in recent years, another phenomenon seems more interesting by, not only reconfiguring the role of the vampire in the stories, but also reconfiguring the possibilities around its disruptive metaphors. Here, it is not just an attempt to humanize the figure previously seen as a monster in search of an empathic response or making it easier to associate with the characters. This other vampiric reconfiguration empowers its protagonists and endows them with superhuman capabilities and overcoming great obstacles, making them heroes and protectors of our society.

In this perspective, the films from the *Blade* (1998-2004) and *Underworld* (2003-2016) franchises features vampires as superheroes. But we can also extend it to other cases, such as the most famous literary example in *Dracula Untold* (Gary Shore, 2014) – although the critical and financial repercussion of this one is smaller. In these cases, it is noticeable that the narrative arc goes outside the domains of horror (although it still deals with certain cinematographic tropes) and is anchored in a protagonism in which these heroes will save humanity from dangerous threats.

The *Underworld* franchise, which has 5 films released between 2003 and 2016 – *Underworld* (Len Wiseman, 2003); *Underworld: Evolution* (Len Wiseman, 2006);

¹⁶ <https://variety.com/2023/film/box-office/last-voyage-demeter-opening-day-barbie-oppenheimer-1235694258/> and <https://variety.com/2023/film/news/box-office-last-voyage-of-the-demeter-flops-opening-weekend-results-barbie-1235694927/>

¹⁷ <https://variety.com/2023/film/news/renfield-box-office-previews-1235582877/> and <https://www.looper.com/1259123/why-renfield-bombed-at-the-box-office/>

Underworld: Rise of the Lycans (Patrick Tatopoulos, 2009); *Underworld: Awakening* (Måns Mårilind and Björn Stein, 2012); *Underworld: Blood Wars* (Anna Foerster, 2016) – seems to be in tune with the success of superhero narratives in cinema, which have become one of the main blockbuster products today. This use of the vampire character as a heroine through the protagonist Selene, played by Kate Beckinsale, is related to the *Blade* trilogy, with 3 films released between 1998 and 2004 – *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998); *Blade II* (Guillermo del Toro, 2002); *Blade: Trinity* (David S. Goyer, 2004) – which also comes at a time when a series of filmic transpositions of comic books are beginning to become a Hollywood marketing trend¹⁸.

These movies are interesting examples of this vampiric reconfiguration in new genres and replacement from the position of villain of the plot. But they do not point towards an emptying of the metaphorical potential of this figure for a more conservative and moralistic return as in the books and films of the *Twilight* franchise. *Blade* and *Underworld* seem to demonstrate a new path by listing this modification through a break in the establishment of a hegemonic narrative and imagery pattern: the vampire as a white man. Here, this change also occurs in the presentation of two protagonists played by a black man (in the case of *Blade*) and a white woman (in *Underworld*). This is obviously not the first cinematic representation of the vampire persona with these characteristics. The female vampire has a long series of films such as *Dracula's Daughter* (Lambert Hillyer, 1936), *The Vampire Lovers* (Roy Ward Baker, 1970) and *Countess Dracula* (Peter Sasdy, 1971), mentioned above. The black vampire, despite having fewer filmic forays, had already appeared in works such as *Blacula* (William Crane, 1972), *Vampire in Brooklyn* (Wes Craven, 1995) etc.

What these franchises present is, in reality, a movement that offers this modification in two different hegemonic spheres – that of the vampire and that of the superhero. Within a cultural imaginary, marked by figures, mostly represented by a white man, this displacement becomes interesting when realizing that the encounter between these two imaginaries arises with a reconfiguration in both patterns and not in a perpetuation that would combine the same dominant characteristics in the Hollywood sociopolitical cultural structure. Thus, we can return to the metaphorical possibilities of this teratological creation in its disruptive sense – not as a continuity of a Eurocentric patriarchal hegemony, but rather as the beginning of an attempt at greater representation and diversity in an industry that is still very little inclusive.

¹⁸ For more details, see: Garcia (2023).

4. Conclusion

This paper seeks to reflect on the adaptability of the vampire figure to the contemporary cinematographic scenario. Moved by the curious phenomenon of an apparent disappearance of this character as a villain from major current productions, we propose a more philosophical exercise around this character than a search for an outlined mapping of these representations. Previously, a survey of all Dracula transpositions had already been done in my book, published in 2014, and a growing lack of successful blockbusters was noticeable after the 1992 film version, directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

Years later, we sought to apply this observation to vampires in general. In line with an apparent domestication of monsters and villains – where Disney's reinterpretations may be the most famous current examples –, we realize that this being continues to exist in cinemas. But its most famous versions (at least, measured through box office numbers) are no longer the same. Now, they have become more humanized or sociable. Or the famous superheroes who protect us from real monsters (whatever the current ones may be).

The superhero vampire seems to be one of the most interesting phenomena that occurs around this figure, as it dialogues with the current filmic trend of transposing comic books. In this sense, the idea of otherness ceases to be the "other" (or abnormal) in a negative connotation and implies an apparent valuation of the idea of difference and the singularities of each individual (at least in their media discourse). Today, our superheroes are no longer just a group of white North American men. Some reconfigurations have already occurred since the popularity of cases such as *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Black Panther* (2018).

However, before this popularity of proposals that deconstructed the hegemonic imaginary of the hero figure, these vampire franchises already featured a black hero in the case of *Blade* and a female heroine in *Underworld*. We do not propose to point to these cases as precursors of this filmic trend, since, obviously, the history of cinema already presented various forms of ruptures within paradigmatic configurations established by the Western social imaginary. What we realize is that the meeting between the reconfiguration of a persona marked by the representation of the white man as a gothic villain and the superhero also as a white man takes place, precisely, in the presentation of a protagonist represented by a black man, and a protagonist played by a white woman. Thus, we understand that the investigative possibility of this proposal allows greater depth that dialogues with a new crop of issues that reward essential debates on sociopolitical and cultural elements of the contemporary scenario.

Perhaps the vampire is reconfiguring himself in search of greater creative freedom and commercial success (the great reason that governs Hollywood cinema). However, its modifications as a figure of otherness of the different can present curious analyses. After all, in a postmodern (or contemporary) scenario, sociopolitical debate and the need for greater representation are in vogue. Cinema seems to take advantage of these guidelines and profit from them. It would be up to the cinematic vampire to do the same.

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