

Repetition and Innovation

Review of *Dracula 2020*

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Dracula is a BBC1/Netflix series consisting of three 90-minute episodes that aired in January 2020 and was created by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat (whose previous writing credits include *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock*). The story—which is only initially faithful to the original narrative in Bram Stoker’s most celebrated and most adapted 1897 novel—begins in a Hungarian convent, where an emaciated and visibly ill Mr. Jonathan Harker (John Effernan) recounts his experience with Count Dracula to the assertive and unusual Sister Agatha Van Helsing (Dolly Wells). In the first episode, “The Rules of the Beast,” Harker reaches the Count’s castle in Transylvania in order to conclude some business transactions establishing the nobleman’s acquirement of some properties in London. The castle itself becomes a protagonist in this episode, as it is presented through vertiginous frames in its exteriors and through medium shots in its narrow, claustrophobic candle-lit interiors. Contrary to the previous cinematic and TV adaptations, it is for the first time depicted as a labyrinthine setting, a “prison without locks,” that Harker vainly attempts to escape on several occasions. Dracula (Claes Bang) is an old, withered man with long white hair, but he becomes younger and stronger with each passing night while Harker grows weaker, loses his hair, and becomes paler and paler until he is an emasculated, feeble being completely in the Count’s power. More terrorising is the spontaneity with which the vampire reveals his nature and actions (even his adversity to the Sun) to his guest, who is too weak and impotent to react—an impotence that is definitely a source of anguish for the spectator.

The vampire's act of feeding on Harker is never shown during the episode, which contributes to the viewer's growing anxiety for the fate of the character. This is the case also for those spectators who are familiar with the story and would rather expect the Count's brides to prey on the Englishman (only one of them is seen; the others are held inside locked boxes) rather than the Count himself. In this sense, this series actualises the vampire's pronouncement regarding Harker, "this man belongs to me," which has been interpreted by Christopher Craft as an assertion of potential homo-bisexuality on the part of Dracula (262–263). Such intimacy between the two male characters was only alluded to in F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) and its remake by Werner Herzog (1979) as well as in Jesús Franco's Spanish production, *Count Dracula* (1970), but it was realised explicitly in Dario Argento's *Dracula 3D* (2012). Equally innovative is the presence, in the subterranean tunnels of the castle, of zombie-like rotting corpses that follow the protagonist and are supposedly his predecessors as Dracula's guests, the "undead" who are conscious of their own bodily corruption. This is one of the most distressing details of the series, the rotting body consuming itself while the individual's mind being left conscious—a representation severely different from the eternal life and beauty depicted in Neil Jordan's *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) and the series *True Blood* (2008–2014) and *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–2017).

In the second episode, "Blood Vessel," the Count's journey to London aboard the *Demeter* is narrated to Sister Agatha, who is the unwilling prisoner of the vampire. The latter, passing for one of the passengers, takes his time to decimate all the humans aboard the vessel until he is discovered and fights against the remaining people, with a final explosion that incapacitates him before the ship can reach the shores of Whitby. The final episode, "The Dark Compass," is set in modern-day England and depicts the Count coming to shore after sleeping for over a century inside a box on the ocean's floor. After some mayhem he causes in the countryside, he is captured by scientist Zoe Van Helsing (Dolly Wells), a descendant of Sister Agatha, and imprisoned in the facility controlled by the Jonathan Harker Foundation she runs. After submitting some blood, he is freed by his lawyer, Frank Renfield (Mark Gatiss), as he cannot be charged with any crimes—a comment on how a real criminal can be protected by legal quibbles. Contrary to the vampire in Alan Gibson's *Dracula AD 1972* (who confines himself inside an abandoned church in the middle of London), but similarly to Patrick Lussier's *Dracula 2000* (whose Count enjoys the festivities of the Mardi Gras in New Orleans), this Dracula

takes advantage of contemporary life and its comforts, living in a luxurious top-floor apartment and going to clubs. He is even fascinated by modern technology and learns quickly how to use weapons, television, email, and mobile phones. He meets Lucy Westenra (Lydia West), a willing victim who texts with him and dates him in cemeteries (where some of the vampire's victims are buried undead). The treatment of the character is quite original because, as Alasdair Wilkins has pointed out, her "total nihilism and unprecedented willingness to let Dracula feed on her are potentially interesting departures from the book's depiction of Lucy as a paragon of sweetness, as her role here is not as the corrupted innocent but rather as a disaffected wanderer through life. Her life isn't so different from Dracula's undeath."

Quite original to the series is the depiction of Dracula's sadism: his calm delivery of the lines and sardonic half-smile make him a hateful character, quite far from the fascinating creatures of the night represented by Anne Rice or the modern versions of the vampire presented in the TV series *The Originals* (2013–2018), a viewer could be attracted to or could sympathise with. Furthermore, and contrary to Dan Curtis' *Dracula* (1974), John Badham's *Dracula* (1979), and Gary Shore's *Dracula Untold* (2014), the 2020 series' Count is incapable of love, as he himself admits to one of his victims, thus making him all the more a vicious and unpleasant figure. As Michael Idato argues, "Dracula the caricature is, by virtue of over-mining, a tiresome cliché. But Dracula the man, drawn here in three dimensions and an unsettling mixture of loathing and charm, is a masterpiece."

Similarly to what occurs in the *Underworld* saga (2003–2016), the vampire can read his victims' thoughts and memories after he tastes their blood—blood which he craves even in tiny drops and admits being intoxicated by and addicted to. Previously unheard of is also the fact that the kiss of the vampire works as an opiate, erasing recent memories of his victims and turning them into mindless zombies even without the mutual exchange of fluids—which, in the novel as well as in Hans W. Geißendörfer's *Jonathan* (1970) and Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), is depicted as necessary for the vampire to create another of his kind, to reproduce. The special effects, though not as spectacular as in a cinematic production such as Stephen Sommers' *Van Helsing* (2004), are nonetheless very effective in depicting Dracula's supernatural powers, as when he climbs the convent's walls, transforms back from a wolf into a human, and literally vomits the fog enveloping the *Demeter* during its doomed voyage.

Apart from those parts of the narrative that reproduce faithfully the precursor text by Stoker, what is notable is the emphasis, in the first episode, on written documents—hand-written in the case of the letters and Harker’s diary, type-written by Mina—through the close-ups on them, which hints at the epistolary nature of the original novel. On the other hand, allusions are made to some predecessor films, including the first Hammer production, Terence Fisher’s *Dracula* (1958). Another detail that is worthy of note is the fact that the vampire’s main adversary in the three episodes is an adult woman, which re-settles the dynamics of the original narrative by Stoker (in which women are unwilling preys of the Count and need to be defended and rescued by the group of men constituting the Crew of Light) into a more contemporary frame of mind presenting both Sister Agatha and her descendant, Zoe, as resolute women, ready to face and even challenge their ruthless adversary in spite of his supernatural powers.

The television series is filled with unexpected twists and sudden revelations quite far from the original narrative, though they are completely coherent with this story’s premises and course of events. *Dracula* thus fills in some details that add up to Stoker’s precursor text, as is the case of the passengers of the *Demeter*, whom Dracula socialises and flirts with, only to feed on them later on (the original narrative only mentions the members of the ship’s crew). On the other hand, the last episode’s drastic departure from Stoker’s story by means of the chronological setting of the story in contemporary London is a welcome alternative to the original narrative that has been rarely considered before. The finale is decisively unexpected, though maybe it comes too suddenly and may leave spectators unprepared for it. Reviewers have generally agreed on the merits of this series. Lucy Mangan recognises that it is a “homage to all the great Counts who have gone before, but still entirely its own thing. And again, like the best of Gatiss and Moffat’s Sherlocks, with the searching intelligence that promises to flesh out the foundational story.” Among the few voices who have not appreciated this production is Melanie Macfarland’s, who affirms that the series is dull and tedious, especially in its first episode, in which “Moffat and Gatiss (perhaps unintentionally) translate [Jonathan Harker’s] feeling of weakness and sluggishness into a vicarious experience by conveying the boredom that comes with imprisonment.” The 2020 *Dracula* is an innovative contribution to the adaptations of the figure of the Transylvanian Count and will certainly be appetising to both fans and scholars of the prince of darkness.

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Antonio Sanna completed his PhD at the University of Westminster in London in 2008. His main research areas are English literature, Gothic literature, horror films and TV series, epic and historical films, superhero films, and cinematic adaptations. In the past fifteen years, he has published about one hundred articles and reviews in international journals and attended thirty conferences. Antonio is the co-editor of the Lexington Books’ series, *Critical Companions to Contemporary Directors*, which includes his volumes focused on Tim Burton (2017), James Cameron (2018), Steven Spielberg (2019), Robert Zemeckis (2020), and Mel Gibson (2023). He has also edited the volumes *Pirates in History and Popular Culture* (McFarland, 2018), *Critical Essays on Twin Peaks: The Return* (Palgrave, 2019), *Arthur Machen: Critical Essays*

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