

Changes in the Aesthetics of Vampires in Western Film and Television

Works

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Abstract

Through the examination of vampire-themed works in Western film and television productions, it can be found that in the history of the development of Western vampire-themed works, the creators have shaped systematized vampire aesthetics through a variety of factors such as scenes, costumes, makeup, and story content. The aesthetics develop continuously with the times, from the horror-led vampire aesthetics at the beginning of the genre to the more diversified and even idolized image and youthful audience trend in the new era, which demonstrates the strong vitality of vampire aesthetics and the contemporary transmutation of the vampire culture related to it.

KeyWords

Vampire, vampire aesthetics, western film and television productions

Introduction

Vampire aesthetics occupy a unique and important position in the field of Western film and television, attracting countless viewers with its mysterious charm since its birth. From the early classic film *Nosferatu*, which created a horrifying and eerie feeling with its unique light and atmosphere, laying down the horror tone of vampire movies, to the modern *Twilight* series which blends the vampire image with elements of youth and love, a worldwide craze has been triggered. Numerous film and television works, such as *Interview with the Vampire*, *Dracula* (1992), and *The Vampire Diaries* continue to emerge, continuously enriching and expanding the boundaries of vampire culture, and which makes it everlasting in Western film and television.

The exploration of vampire aesthetics in Western film and television works helps to deeply understand the deeper connotations of Western culture. As a unique symbol of Western culture, the vampire image carries the values, moral concepts, religious beliefs, and social psychology of Western society in different historical periods. We can gain a deeper understanding of how vampire works reflect Western culture themes like death, immortality, desire, and taboos if we look into the whole timeline the vampire aesthetics went through, as well as how these concepts have evolved over time.

1. The Traceability of Vampire Aesthetics: From Legend to the First Bloom on the Screen

1.1 Roots in Religious Mythology

Vampires, these fictional creatures, and many folk tales related with them, are mostly from different religions and myths, and the stories from the Bible have the biggest influence. In the Bible, Cain killed his brother Abel out of jealousy, and God punished him afterwards, sent him out of paradise. According to legend, Cain wandered near the Red Sea, where he met the night witch Lilith. He learned blood magic from her and gained immortality, but then he had to constantly drink blood, so finally he became the first vampire. This story sets the foundation for vampires being fallen and cursed, reflecting the religious idea of punishment for so-called original sin, and from the very beginning, it gave vampires a negative origins.¹.

1.2 The Interweaving of Folklore, History, and Culture

Many stories in folklore are linked to the history of Europe itself, and together they helped shape the image of the vampire. The Black Death of the 14th century is probably the most widely known plague in European history; it claimed the lives of approximately one-third of Europe's population. Unable to explain the spread of the disease or their fear of death from a scientific perspective, people of that era blame the cause to supernatural forces; it was amid this panic that vampire legends gradually emerged. People believed that the plague and death were brought about by creatures that walked at night and fed on the blood of the living; these creatures spread disease through blood and turned their victims into new vampires, thereby causing the epidemic to spread further. The idea of linking major public health crises with vampires reflects people's fear of the unknown and a sense of how fragile life is.

Folk tales and cultural traditions from different areas have also made vampire legends more diverse. In some Eastern European countries, vampire stories are often related to some custom of death. For example, in some areas, people believed that if someone wasn't properly buried after death, or had experienced misfortune in life, they might turn into a vampire and start to drink human blood. While this belief reflects people's fears, it also shows how they thought about life back then. In ancient Greek and Roman mythology, vampire-like creatures

also appeared, such as vampire bats and half-human, half-animal vampire creatures, and these images provided the prototype for later vampire legends.

Beyond this, the story of Vlad III (figure 1), a fifteenth century ruler of the Romanian region, also became the prototype for the vampire. Vlad III, ruler of the Principality of Wallachia, was born in the region of Transylvania. Nicknamed “the Impaler” for his fondness for impalement as punishment, his reign saw prolonged warfare between Wallachia and the Ottoman Turks. Historically, he made significant contributions to the Romanian people’s resistance against Turkish invaders during the fifteenth century. However, vampire legends primarily circulated among Slavic peoples in the Balkans and had little direct connection to the Romanian region. The fusion of Vlad III’s story with vampire lore actually occurred through various artistic adaptations that merged it with Slavic folklore.



Figure 1. Vlad III.

2. Vampire Image and Aesthetic Presentation in Early Film and Television Works

2.1 *Nosferatu*: The Founding Work of Horror Aesthetics

The 1922 German expressionist film *Nosferatu* (figure 2) is the founding work of vampire-themed film and television works, and lays a solid foundation for the horror aesthetics of vampire films. The image of vampire Count Orlok in the movie is full of horror elements. His strange appearance—pale skin without blood, as if a ghost returning from the world of death; his bald head and prominent pointed ears making him look more like a monster from the abyss of darkness; his sharp and prominent rat's fangs ready to pierce into the victims' necks and suck their blood—all bring a strong visual impact and psychological horror to the audience.



Figure 2. Still from the film *Nosferatu*, 1922.

The movie further strengthens the horror aesthetics through its unique scenes and atmosphere. Dim lighting is an important means to create a horror atmosphere; the movie primarily uses low illumination light so that the picture is shrouded in darkness, and only a few key parts are illuminated by weak light, such as the face of Count Orlok, the interior of Dracula's Castle, etc., which is a strong contrast between dark and light. This not only enhances the picture's sense of hierarchy, but also creates a mysterious and eerie atmosphere, so that it is as if the audience is in a world full of unknown fears.

The scene design of the movie is also very distinctive, with the use of classic scenes such as Gothic castles, black forests, and cemeteries, which perfectly fit the horror aesthetics of the movie. Dracula's Castle is situated

on a treacherous mountain peak, surrounded by a dense black forest. They made the film more depressed and gloomy, which stands for the core of early vampire images.

3. The Evolution of Vampire Aesthetics: Image Remodeling and Aesthetic Turning

3.1 Leadership of Literary Works

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is the most well known vampire novel, which can be considered the first vampire work. In this work, the author made the main character and the historical figure Vlad III more connective, building a stronger link between the vampire story and real historical figures and events, while also write it in a more religious and tragic way. Since then, many vampire films have been based on this work.

After Bram Stoker's classic '*Dracula*,' Anne Rice's '*Interview with the Vampire*' was considered the most unique vampire novel. This book have a great effect on the development of vampire fiction; its style and characters are different from previous vampire works and have influenced the evolution of other vampire works.²

This work was published in 1976 and caused a huge blowup back then, attracting many readers to buy it. Unlike traditional vampire stories, where vampires are usually just be seen as evil and scary, Anne Rice gave vampires deep humanity and complex emotions through her unique writing style.

The way of storytelling of '*Interview with the Vampire*' is also pretty unique because it contains both reality and memories. The main story follows Louis as he tells a reporter about his memories in different period of times. This way of storytelling lets readers get into Louis's inner world deeper, feeling his emotional changes and growth over the years, and makes the story more attractive.

This novel is very different from traditional vampire stories, making vampires more than just symbols of fear—they became real characters with humanity, emotions, even souls. Many films and shows have wrote their own vampires afterwards, they all tried to explore the humanity and emotions of the characters like this one, which pushed the innovation and development of vampire figures in film and TV further.³

3.2 Echo of Film and Television Works

The 1992 movie *Dracula* is a powerful echo of the transformation of the image of vampires under the trend of romanticism, which has left a colorful mark on vampire-themed film and television works with its unique artistic style and deep emotional connotation.

The image of Count Dracula in the movie is very different from the traditional vampire image; he is no longer a simple evil monster, but a complex character driven by love and full of human struggle. Count Dracula was originally a lord who fought against foreign enemies, and he was deeply in love with his wife, Elizabeth. However, during the war, the enemy spread the rumor of his death in battle back home. Elizabeth was so grief-stricken that she chose to commit suicide for her love. When Count Dracula returned to the castle and faced the cold body of his wife, his faith in God instantly collapsed and he angrily cursed God, and was cursed with the curse of immortality and not being able to see the light.

This love across life and death became the spiritual pillar of Count Dracula, and made his image full of romanticism. He stumbled upon Elizabeth's reincarnation of Mina hundreds of years later, and in order to reunite with her, he traveled across thousands of mountains to London trying to claim her for himself.

The emergence of *Dracula* in 1992 marks a significant shift in the image of vampires in film and television, which echoes the reshaping of the image of vampires in literature, transforming the vampire from a purely horrific image to a character with rich emotions and humanity, and triggering a shift in the aesthetic perceptions of the audience. From then on, vampire-themed film and television works were no longer limited to horror and thriller elements, but began to focus on the emotional expression of the characters and the portrayal of human nature, opening up a new path for the development of vampire aesthetics.

4. Vision and Ideology: The Internal Logic of Vampire Aesthetic Evolution

4.1 Danger and Fear: The Vampire Image During Economic Depression

The physical traits of vampires in Western movies and TV shows carry unique symbolic meaning and aesthetic value, and they are an important part of vampire aesthetics themselves. In the early 20th century, two iconic vampire films were released: the 1922 German film "Nosferatu" and the 1931 American film "Dracula." Both films were adapted from the novel "Dracula" and were made and released during economic downturns in their respective countries. In "Nosferatu," the protagonist goes alone to an old castle, representing an official visit

to negotiate with Count Nosferatu; along the way, he encounters a series of strange events and uncovers the vampire's secrets.⁴

As everyone knows, as a defeated country in World War I, Germany suffered unprecedented economic blows, and society fell into an atmosphere of oppression and despair. It was at this time that a movie about a lonely explorer venturing into a mysterious castle in search of treasure was released. This somber story deeply moved the audience and just happened to reflect the harsh economic situation in Germany at the time. For Germans, Transylvania, where the castle was located in the movie, symbolized a mysterious land they had hardly ever set foot on. After World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which once ruled Transylvania, completely collapsed. Coupled with the bloody history of invasions by the Turks, Transylvania gradually became a place in eternal chaos. So, the vampires portrayed in the movie—just like people's stereotypes of that region—are full of terror and danger, and the whole work is filled with a sense of pessimism—which, to some extent, also reflects the political and economic situation in Germany at the time.

The 1931 American film *Dracula* (figure 3), meanwhile, was made and released during the Great Depression. Its similar narrative resonated deeply with an American public grappling with economic crisis. Beyond this, the portrayal of Dracula in this film was heavily influenced by Hollywood's aesthetic. Bela Lugosi's Count Dracula was handsome, dashing, and elegant. Clearly, despite being created during America's economic downturn, the American version of Dracula retained the commercial elements inherent to Hollywood as the epicenter of commercial cinema. The film packaged Count Dracula as a melancholic nobleman with an elegant image. Even though his existence symbolized fear and danger, he still exuded boundless charm. This charismatic villain setup allowed Count Dracula to gain a broader market appeal and also made the vampire image begin to shine brightly in North America. Indeed, following the Great Depression and the onset of North America's economic recovery, the region became the most concentrated, diverse, and influential arena for vampire imagery development.



Figure 3. Still from the film *Dracula*, 1931.

4.2 The Rise of Subculture and the Rebirth of Vampire Aesthetics in Goth Culture

During the 1970s and 1980s, subcultures gradually emerged in grassroots communities across North America and Europe, fueled by multiple factors including the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the post-war crisis of the capitalist system. These cultural circles embraced highly diverse aesthetic sensibilities, all centered on rebellious, anti-traditional tastes that incorporated abundant street and folk elements. Tattoos, piercings, low-budget films, and street graffiti all gained traction during this period.

Unlike the hippie movement of the 1960s, which organized large-scale mass movements advocating peace and opposing war, the subsequent subcultures externalized their rebellious aesthetic sensibilities into artworks, slang, and small-scale industries (such as tattoo parlors). The subcultures of the 1980s effectively shed the modernist elements of the hippie movement, instead pursuing pre-modern traits like closed communities and symbolism. This revival brought discarded symbols back into the spotlight. It was within this context that Goth culture (figure 4) emerged.

Members of the Goth subculture, known as Goth Girls or Goth Boys, drew numerous cultural symbols from medieval and Victorian Britain. They adorned themselves with piercings, covered their skin with tattoos featuring obscure Gothic script, dressed entirely in black, and applied heavy, eerie makeup—evoking the vampire from *Nosferatu*. Indeed, the vampire symbol became an integral part of Goth culture. Consequently, as the Goth subculture expanded, vampire cinema—which had declined and stagnated after WWII—was rediscovered. The

eerie and terrifying vampire figures from *Nosferatu* and *Dracula* became powerful symbols within Goth culture. Simultaneously, the rise of cult films within communities led to the rapid spread of low-budget splatter movies among subcultural groups, where vampire imagery also found its place. It can be said that vampire aesthetics found enrichment and rebirth within the environment of subcultural emergence.⁵



Figure 4. A group of Goths.

4.3 Hollywood's Commercial Reinvention of Vampire Aesthetics After the Cold War

Beginning in the 1990s, the United States, victorious in the Cold War, began dominating global cultural dissemination. Hollywood emerged as its undisputed vanguard. During this period, the vampire image went through a full commercial makeover, gradually get rid of its horror film label and showing up in all kinds of different works.

In 1992, "Dracula" (Figure 5), which directed by the famous America director Francis Ford Coppola was released in theater. In this movie, Coppola completely rewrite the story of Count Dracula from Bram Stoker's original novel. The film picked many young and popular actors, and make the costumes, makeup, and set design as luxurious and as possible, aiming to attract a wider audience and create a place for vampire movies in the popular market. In the film, Count Dracula was a national hero fighting Turkish on the battlefield. During the war, rumors of his death spreads on the front lines; his wife, overwhelmed by grief, commits suicide and immediately

descends into hell. After that, Count Dracula cursed the Catholic Church and God and his followers, which turns him into a vampire who can only walk at night. With the popularity of this new story version, people's view towards vampires changed too. They no longer seen vampire as only a scary creatures from early German silent films, or the 'Western capitalists' appear on Soviet posters during Cold War. Instead, they became tragic heroes who sacrificed for their country, only to be forced into darkness by the persecution of religious authorities.



Figure 5. The poster of the film *Dracula*, 1992.

Besides, the vampire aesthetic also contains teenage idols. Released in 2008, 'Twilight' blew a mania for vampire stories among young audiences worldwide. Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson's perfect looks attracted millions of young fans around the world. In 'Twilight' and its sequels, the origin stories and cultural meanings of

vampires were mostly changed, leaving just symbolic elements, like wings and teeth.. The story mainly focuses on the emotional journey of young people, effectively turning vampire into a fashionable symbol. This packaging, alongside the commercialization of vampire themes throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, successfully brought vampire aesthetics into the broader public consciousness. It laid the base for the deeper, innovation of vampire aesthetics that would unfold in the 2010s and beyond.⁶

4.4 Vampire Aesthetics' New Posture Under Multicultural Politics and the LGBT Movement

Entering the 2010s, the global capitalist market was recovering from the subprime mortgage crisis. Conservative liberals in North America and Europe faced significant challenges. Heightened vigilance toward capitalism itself propelled Western leftist politics into unprecedented public prominence. Their emphasis on, and care for, ethnic and sexual minorities generated an undeniable seismic shift. In 2010 Spirit Day was first launched. From then on, sexual minorities began leveraging the rapid dissemination capabilities of emerging media in the information age to voice injustices faced within society. Their core focus centered on opposing conservative views like homophobia and transphobia, while converging with feminist movements.

Under the influence of various “woke” ideologies, vampire-themed works themselves have evolved. In 2022, the new TV adaptation of *Interview with the Vampire* premiered. The protagonist shifted from the handsome white male of the 1990s film version to a Black man, and the story’s homosexual subplots were portrayed more explicitly.

In 2025, *Sinners* premiered in North America. This film, rooted in Southern vampire lore, uses an intense battle against vampires to depict the history and experiences of Black culture (and other minorities) in America. Through the vampire genre, it brought a rare topic to the screen: how do the indigenous cultures brought by immigrants transform within this context? How do cultures interact here, and how do ethnic groups navigate the gradual assimilation of their native cultures into others?

Entering a new era, vampire aesthetics have been enriched under the influence of fresh ideological currents, gradually adopting more diverse forms. The symbolic meanings of many motifs have been deconstructed and reconstructed—the best testament to the genre’s enduring vitality.

Conclusion

Through the whole timeline, we can see that vampire aesthetics came a long way from bottom to the top. Early films like *Nosferatu* and *Dracula* showed the bases of how vampire look like. After that, vampire works started to use all sorts of depressed and gloomy visual effects, settings, and atmospheres, which made vampires as a purely evil and terrifying symbol. This not only for satisfied audiences' desire for thrill and fear but also

reflected the public's anxiety about the unknown crisis during the Great Depression. After the Cold War, influenced by Hollywood, movies like Coppola's *Dracula* (1992) gave vampires human emotions. Their image becoming a real person with complex emotions and relationships, but of course, still drink bloods. This change highlights the leading role literature played in filmmaking and also shows how regular people tastes changed from straightforward horror to stories with more emotional plots.

Entering the twenty one century, the *Twilight* series created a more attractive vampire image for teenagers, combined vampire with youth and love, presenting a romantic story full of youthful energy. Since the 2010s, left-wing politics and ideologies have had a deep impact on vampire stories, created many unique works contain sexual minorities and racial topics. This has also make vampire aesthetics has more themes than usual.

After nearly a century of exploration and evolution, vampire aesthetics have been shaped by the ideological trends of various economic and political environments throughout different historical periods. This has produced a large number of artworks in diverse styles, fully showcasing the strong vitality of vampire aesthetics.

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西方影視作品中吸血鬼美學的變遷

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摘要:透過對西方影視作品中吸血鬼主題的考察可以發現，在西方吸血鬼題材發展的歷史進程中，創作者透過場景設計、服裝造型、化妝技巧和故事內容等多元要素，逐步構建起系統化的吸血鬼美學體系。這種美學隨著時代發展持續演進——從早期以恐怖元素為主導的吸血鬼美學，到新時代呈現出的多元化甚至偶像化形象與年輕化受眾趨勢，充分展現了吸血鬼美學本身強大的生命力及其相關文化的當代嬗變。

關鍵詞: 吸血鬼；吸血鬼美學；西方影視作品