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THE VISION OF RELIGION IN FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA'S *BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA*

Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* gives one the impression of being heavily religious in its iconography but that such icons are rather commonplace and reduced to an excessive presence of Catholic symbols, particularly crosses of all types: one Maltese cross (we could wonder if it is not a cross patty), Latin crosses (a lot), one Greek cross, one Celtic cross, one clechy cross, and one botonny cross, plus quite a few crucifixes, one enormous altar crucifix, and one wayside Calvary cross. Among this inventory, one would expect to find a Rosy Cross, since the film deals with controversial religious themes and vampires at a time when Christendom was menaced by the Moslem Turks. But there is no Rosy Cross, no allusion then to the Templars, to Mary Magdalene, the Caballah, the Rosicrutians, the Gnostics, or any other deviant branch of Christianity.

And yet the film is religious from beginning to end, with an opening sequence that is pure religion, but I doubt that Francis Ford Coppola was conscious at the time of making a deeply religious film, in spite of its opening sequence. In this article, then, I will discuss why the film has such a religious nature and try to assess the level of awareness Francis Ford Coppola may have had about the subject. In so doing, I will address an essential question: does the film represent the standard vision of the vampire as an enemy, a monster to be destroyed for our own good, or does it attempt to do something else? In other words, is Francis Ford Coppola in line with Stephen King, who sees the vampire as a monster to be destroyed and nothing else, or does he share the view of Anne Rice, who sees the vampire as a lovable monster (if a monster at all), and an extremely *human* being (even if it is no longer a human being), who can be seen as a reincarnation of Jesus Christ since the vampire, too, has the power to save humanity? Or is Francis Ford Coppola following his own line of thinking, if one at all?

The last question I address is one about religion in general in the film. Does it constitute a motivation, a solace, an escape, a damnation, a protection, a weapon, or a salvation? And what, if either of these, is Coppola's Christian rooting, particularly in the film's numerous references to the Bible? Assessing the film's Christian dimension reveals its postmodern nature as none of these questions can be answered very easily: all are open and refuse to be closed. Monster or non-monster, Christian or non-Christian, a crusade against Dracula or a pilgrimage to apotheosize him? All choices are open; no option is final and absolutely sure.

The first sequence: the past

The first sequence of *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, even before its opening credits, is meant to set the historical background, which is highly religious. Christendom is under attack by the Ottomans, or Turks, who have been stopped by Count Dracula, a member of the Sacred Order of the Dragon at the end of the fifteenth century. The film opens in the year 1462, where the religious symbols of the cathedral in Constantinople are changed for those of a mosque. The first cross of the film, probably a Maltese cross, is hurled to the ground, shatters, and is then replaced by a crescent, the only crescent to be featured in the film, notwithstanding the crescent-shaped decoration adorning the helmet of a Turkish soldier. Though Coppola does not provide the historical details, we are to understand that the cathedral is Hagia Sophia (Saint Sophia's) in present-day Istanbul.

Sophia means "wisdom" in Greek, an essential doctrine in early Christianity. One of the apocryphal gospels is even known as the Gospel of the Sophia of Jesus Christ. But this "power and wisdom of God" is Christ, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:25. This wisdom of God, as opposed to the wisdom of man (that is, of the flesh), is central to the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, as well as to much of St. Paul's writings. The fall of Saint Sophia's is thus a religious symbol that carries us far inside the Christian faith.

What is also noteworthy is that Sophia was the Goddess of Wisdom for the Mediterranean world in the first century. The bride of God himself, she was a Goddess who was either adulated or rejected entirely. Some also see her as the Irish Sheela-na-gig, the Great Mother, the Mother of all things, but also the Goddess of Death and the underworld. Yet we must not forget that this very Sophia was designated, via the Atbash cipher, as Baphomet by the Templars—[taf][mem][vav][pe][bet] for "Baphomet" in Hebrew, which is read from right to left, becomes [alef][yud][pe][vav][shib], or Sophia, a Greek word written in Hebrew from right to left – and that this reference was seen as a gnostic element in that order. The Templars in this very first sequence – though the absence of a Rosy Cross or a Templars cross is rather surprising here – are engaged in the Crusades against the Muslims, which is in agreement with the film's timeframe; that the debate over the death or survival of Jesus, his relationship with Mary Magdalene, and the fate of his bones, etc. was popular at the time the film and video came out in 1992 and 1994, respectively, may have contributed to Coppola's decision to frame Stoker's novel within this historical context. What is more, the Maltese cross is a direct allusion to the various orders that used this cross as a symbol, orders that were connected to the Holy Land, the Crusades, etc.

This one image in the film thus transmits to the audience multiple layers of meaning, even if the reference to Constantinople, a name actually used by the voice-over, sends us back to the triumph of Pauline theology under Emperor Constantine. All of that need not be expressed, however, as it is part of the West's historical unconscious. We are dealing instead with the subliminal dimension of the film and its animated images. The medium is the message more than the message itself, or the message *qua* message is entirely determined by the medium, as Mar-

shall McLuhan has argued.¹ As such, we are led to “read” Coppola’s film in light of his post-modern theory since its religious meaning is purely subliminal, expressed not so much in its words but rather in its images alone. And by not being expressed in words but rather in the simple swapping of religious symbols atop a place of worship that we are supposed to recognize – which could even promote an Islamic reading of this scene, as I will discuss later on – Coppola avoids choosing sides.

On the eve of the battle, Dracula prepares himself in the chapel of his castle with Orthodox priests. The altar of this chapel is dominated by a cross that should be a crucifix but is not. At the crosspoint is a large round boss. The two arms, or branches, and the column, or trunk, are decorated with some kind of carving (a bas relief carved into the stone but not out of the stone). While it is impossible to make out the details, on each side of the cross can be seen an angel standing in the shadow, and they resemble either two eagles, because of their wings, or two candelabra with nine candles each. Nine and nine make eighteen. Nine is an allusion to the ninth hour that marked Christ’s death (“When the sixth hour came there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour”, Mark 15:33), but it is also considered in its triplicate as the symbol of Satan. Here, only two nines are provided, but eighteen divided by three is six. If six is positive because it is Solomon’s number, its triplicate is negative: “[...] the number of the beast: it is the number of a man, the number 666”, Revelation 13:18.²

The visual reference to dualism (the two candelabra and the two angels) and the more abstract reference to ternarism are essential but very complex. Dualism is a reference to gnosticism, but also to the dual nature of the Old Testament God (God and God’s spirit in Genesis 1:1-2), whereas ternarism is a reference to the Trinity, the triple nature of the New Testament God (God, the Holy Spirit, and the Son of God, though we must note the phrase “Son of God” came later and was referred to by Jesus as the “Son of Man”, who abundantly spoke of his Father, even if Jewish tradition spoke of God as the father). And yet this ternary is perverted into some diabolical reference, though to reach it we may need to use dualism: twice nine is eighteen, which is three times six, which is twice three, just as nine is three times three. This complex intertwining of binary and ternary elements is once again part of our historical and here religious subconscious, widely reinforced by Shakespeare’s and subsequent English poets’ language and poetry. Two centuries before Shakespeare, Chaucer had already used this basic opposition in the English language: the binary iambic rhythm versus the disruptive ternary element (the three temples of the final “tournament” in “The Knight’s Tale,” for example, that cover up two temples to goddesses versus one temple to one god, and are the reverse sexual image of two knights fighting to the death over one woman).³

It is on this background that Dracula takes leave of his wife, Elisabeta. When he goes out of the castle, the army is seen waving spears and two crosses. The ensuing battle is brutal but ends in victory with a Turkish soldier sliding down the spear on which he was impaled and with the crescent-like decoration on his helmet undulating as his body descends. Dracula then kisses a bottonny cross and says in his own language (the English translation appearing in subtitles): “God be praised. I am victorious” (BSD 15). The subtitles emphasize the clearly religious message here. In fact, the whole end of this sequence will be punctuated by such subtitles, with God appearing as the righteous and effective motivation for the war.

Then the sequence speeds up. Dracula returns home and finds his wife dead in the chapel on the steps to the altar. We have just seen her commit suicide by jumping from the castle into the moat. She finds solace neither in religion nor God. Dracula is confronted by three priests carrying crosses, one of whom says to him: “She has taken her own life, my son. Her soul cannot be

saved. She is damned. It is God's law" (BSD 18). Even after death, religion and God fail to console, and Dracula curses them. As such, the altar, its cross, its two angels, and its two nine-candle candelabra become bad omens for him. Dracula grows angry and incites damnation: "Is this my reward for defending God's church?" (BSD 18). He knocks down the holy-water stoup, spreading the holy water across the floor (the first flooding). He brutally pushes one priest away, prompting them to yell: "Sacrilege!" (BSD 19). Dracula then draws his sword and stabs it in the boss at the crosspoint of the cross: one cross against another cross since the sword is a cross of its own. This image is extremely symbolic. He stabs the very heart of the cross, hence Christ's heart, and when it starts bleeding, it is Christ's heart that is bleeding. In other words, he is shedding Christ's blood in his wrath. This blood quickly spreads (the second flooding), first to an angel who has Jonathan Harker's head (foreshadowing his presence in the next scene), then to a candle, and finally across the entire floor. Dracula takes the chalice and dips it into the blood emerging from the cross. All this is colored by Dracula's declaration: "I renounce God! I shall rise from my own death to avenge hers with all the powers of darkness" (BSD 19). When he brings the chalice to his lips, he says again: "The blood is the life and it shall be mine!" (BSD 19). When the blood finally reaches Elisabeta's corpse. Dracula roars out, falls, and disappears from the frame.



DRACULA BY FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA, 1992

Dracula's war methods. This is clearly expressed visually in the two crescents, the first one during Saint Sophia's deconsecrating (or profaning, per the traditional Christianese meaning of the word), and the second one undulating on the helmet of the impaled Turkish warrior. Once again, no words are used to provide us with an interpretation of this scene; only these images vehicle the message.

This sequence has deep significance as for the vision of religion conveyed by the film. Religion and the cross lead to the blood rite, but the negation of religion perverts the blood rite from Christ's salvation to human damnation brought on by the desire to avenge human injustice. The reference here to the powers of darkness is essential to give the diabolical dimension of Dracula, who appears thus as the Antichrist: by renouncing God as he drinks Christ's blood, he becomes the Beast. From a sacred dragon, Dracula turns into the dragon of the Apocalypse, and the cross becomes the door to darkness.

Coppola's desire to push limits but refusal to choose sides in the holy wars lends the film its postmodern appeal, for this sequence could be read perfectly well from a Moslem point of view: pride at first in the Ottoman expansion, then disgust and even hatred with the brutality of the Christian reaction and Dracula's war methods.

Religion as protection

As soon as Jonathan arrives in Transylvania, stepping off the stagecoach to wait for the Count's carriage, a girl, probably a gypsy, as shown by her headdress, gives him a small crucifix to wear around his neck and says: "For the dead travel fast" (BSD 32). With Jonathan in the background, the camera foregrounds the back of a very particular roadside Calvary. The cross is covered at the top with two boards that form a triangle, and at the crosspoint there seems to be some rags hanging. We then hear wolves howling, and we see the cross with Jonathan's eyes from in front. The storm's lightning enables us to clearly see what appears to be some kind of heavily toothed animal maw.

The first element we retain is the triangle over the cross. We cannot of course measure the angles of the triangle, but the visual proportions are common enough in our geometrical culture and world: either 30°-30°-120°, which leads us to the hexagram, or David's star, or 36°-36°-108°, which are in the pentagram series (18°, 36°, 54°, 72°, 108°).⁴ On the cross, we have a body properly nailed to it, but the head is that of a wolf, and a voracious and monstrous wolf at that. Christ has thus become a wolf: a bad omen for Jonathan (and for the viewer), but also a simple statement that God, Christ, and religion offer no protection at all because Christ is nothing but a wolf, or has been transformed into a wolf in the territory Jonathan is entering. But Jonathan, the good salesman that he is, does not react at all.

Later on in the castle, the crucifix he has received from the gypsy girl protects Jonathan from Dracula while he is shaving in his room. The reflection of Jonathan's crucifix in the razor blade Dracula is holding, and then the same reflection in Dracula's black pupil, forces Dracula to step back from what appears to be his easy prey. Again, when Jonathan wanders about the castle and enters a bedroom in which he is approached, sexually and hungrily, by three women, one of them, who has appeared between his legs and is crawling up his chest, sees the crucifix. She screeches, and the crucifix melts and disappears. It has provided him no protection whatsoever this time. Is it because of the obvious sexual desire – and pleasure – that Jonathan experiences at this moment, or is it for some other reason? I tend towards the former, the sexual desire explanation, because similar results occur later on with Mina and Lucy: if you desire the vampire, you cannot but fall in his (or her) mesmerizing trap, and religious icons can no longer protect those who renounce its chaste principles.⁵

When Jonathan escapes, the haven that saves him is a women's monastery, the monastery of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (perhaps a reference to the *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement* of the seventeenth century, which was considered as being slightly marginal or even heretical to canonical law). He sees it looming in the night rain in the form of two luminous crosses: a Latin cross on the door, and a Greek cross on the window of the entrance, thus joining the two Christian traditions of pre-Reformation Europe. Mina will soon receive a letter from Sister Agatha, go to Romania, and marry Jonathan in the monastery. During their Orthodox wedding ceremony, Mina and Jonathan partake of the blood rite of the Holy Communion, with Coppola emphasizing their drinking the consecrated wine, hence Christ's blood, a blood rite that is often considered as being a direct allusion to, if not recuperation of, the wine rites of Bacchus or Dionysus, a Greek god who is also himself the son of God, Zeus. This communion and blood rite has to be thought of in parallel with Dracula's drinking of the blood of the cross in a chalice at the beginning of the film. But is their religious devotion a form of protection? I do not believe so, since Mina will ultimately be seduced by Dracula, and in fact has already been seduced in London by his young personification, Prince Vlad, all the while Jonathan was recuperating in the monastery. The blood rite is too late, and its protection ineffective.

The failure of religion

The film's essential message, then, is that religion completely fails us, or will fail us. It certainly failed Lucy. Her name, LVX or LUX, means light, but also Luke, and the first-ever representation of Mary as an icon or as a carved image, according to the eastern or western traditions. As such, she is Lucifer, the fallen angel of light. She is also Lug, the Celtic god of metalwork – a sword maker in a way – and light, whose name is found throughout Europe. And yet she is seduced by Dracula in the most traditional vampiristic way: seduction. Her victimization is necessary to assess Mina's later in the story. Once she has been transformed into a vampire, she uses sex and sex appeal to entrap her human victims. When she is finally killed, and Dracula escapes, we find that nothing has protected her, the least of which her religious name. The men with their guns are fooled, the garlic is ineffective, and Dracula remains at large. Even though Lucy leaves her crucifix on her pillow the first time she goes out at night to meet Dracula in the labyrinth, her desire has already trumped the religious icon's effectiveness in protecting her, as it had been early with Jonathan and the three female vampires. Even when she becomes one of the undead and the men assemble to hunt her in her tomb, they kill her in the most common of ways: a stake through the heart (we can note that there is no mention of wood here since it is metal) and the final beheading. She is thus destroyed, but in no way by religion or with an obvious religious dimension, since even the beheading, which is a biblical allusion, is not clearly made religious in the scene. The religious allusion is – or may be – only made clearer by the viewer's historical unconscious.

But religion fails in another way. It fails to stop the dark forces from entering in the first place. We could even argue that religion in the film frees the dark forces to go on with their business. Dracula, for instance, is shown and declared the master of the wind and of the sea (like the spirit of God hovering over the watery abyss in Genesis 1:2). He can start and command a storm, and even travels in a boat that bears a significant name: *Demeter*. Demeter is one of the names of the triple goddess, another religious tradition that bores very deep in westerners' minds. The triple goddess is essential to English literary tradition as early as Shakespeare's thrice-crowned goddess: Hecate, the Goddess of the Dead; Selene, the Goddess of the Night and the Moon (the inconstant moon and its three phases); and Diana, the Goddess of the Day, the forest, and animal life. But Demeter recalls another level of realization of the triple goddess, this time more Germanic. This time, it is Elisabeta who carries the allusion through her name: "beta" links her to the three Bethen: Ambeth (Mother Earth), Wilbeth (the Sun), and Borbeth (the Moon). The suffix "bethen" is connected to two roots: /bett/ refers to the mother-earth on which we used to sleep (bett = bed in English), and /beten/ refers to praying or calling the goddess (beten = to pray in English). These three Bethen have survived in folklore even today in Austria and were even the sources of Shakespeare's three weird sisters in *Macbeth*, where the name Macbeth itself is derived from this root.

This reference to the triple goddess is essential because it shows Dracula as the heir of an older tradition than Christianity, that is to say paganism, which is a biased word inherited from the Christian tradition. Older religions are centered on a cult to nature: the night and the day, as well as the earth, the sun, and the moon. They are deeply ternary in the fact that they do not concentrate on only the sun and the moon, the night and the day, but on three astral spheres – the sun, the moon, and the earth – and thus cannot be reduced to night and day. That could explain why Dracula can go around in the day time, even if his powers are weaker: he is not only a night animal. The world is not simply all black or all white, evidenced in the albino wolf that escapes from the London Zoo, symbol of the night as much as of the day, of darkness as much

as of light. Coppola's turning Stoker's grey Bersicker wolf white could be understood as an inversion of the old Christian tradition of eradicating paganism in our civilization. As such, Coppola's film seems to posit not a post-religious phase in human development, but definitely a post-Christian phase in which all objectives that had been set by Christianity twenty centuries ago have more or less been made irrelevant in our world. And yet, this film, like all films and animated images, is subliminal: with dead images it creates the illusion of movement, and with dead ideology it nourishes the unconscious need of a scapegoat.

As with Lucy, religion ultimately fails Mina. Short for Wilhelmina, (the feminine form of Wilhelm, or protection by will), Mina will be seduced by Prince Vlad, a younger embodiment of Dracula. We cannot deny that Elisabeta and Mina are visually the same person since they are the same actress – once again, the visual element becomes the message. Coppola manipulates the audience here into going beyond the myth, the tradition, the social and cultural habits, just as he had done in forging Jonathan's likeness on the altar cross in Dracula's chapel. Coppola weaves links and lines that go beyond limits, that trespass limits, and add a visual dimension that cannot be carried by the novel alone. He thus produces a vision of love as crossing traditions and centuries, of love as being universal because it is truer than religion. For this reason, Mina-Elisabeta is seduced by Prince Vlad. Though he is a little awkward at first due to his lack of practice of courting in modern society, he is helped a lot by his suggestive powers that force her out of her fear and into his trap. This is very clear when the white wolf appears, transforms the cinematograph into a shadow puppet show that evokes, through its dominant red color and shapes, the war against the Turks of the beginning of the film. But this wolf is controlled by Prince Vlad and also by Mina, who does not seem surprised at all when she caresses the wolf.

Here again, though, nothing can protect us from this natural force that Vlad-Dracula represents: the call from the earth, the primeval forest, the triple goddess, the three Bethen. For that reason, Coppola introduces another example of the failure of religion, and even of science and civilization in general. Renfield, who is completely outside the nascent psychiatry of the time (a new classification will have to be invented for such a case, as Dr. Jack Steward says), unites Ambeth (one of the three goddesses dedicated to the earth), by the root /am-/ or /an-/ (meaning earth and also mother), with the worm that lives in this earth. It is not coincidental, then, that he eats an orange worm the first time he has a discussion with his doctor. Religion fails Renfield, though, because he fell into Dracula's trap when he went to Transylvania in the first place, because he now escapes human and even scientific control, and because he is endowed with the power to communicate with Dracula, his Master. The film is very careful to avoid the term "Lord" that Stoker uses in the novel (cf. D 245) and to only use the term "Master" so as not to mix Dracula and Jesus in this particular context. But we could queer this reference and put forward the symbolic dimension of the worm-penis living in the earth-(Ren)field-womb. I would insist here on the importance of using the term "penis" instead of "phallus" because for Jacques Lacan, a major figure in post-structuralist and postmodern criticism, everyone has a phallus, including women of course, since the phallus is not a sex organ but a construct or a reconstruct of the language used to signify the Self: the Ideal of the Ego, the virtual model and target everyone builds in their minds to guide themselves or to be guided by on the road leading to being and becoming fully realized individuals.

Perhaps the most striking example of the failure of religion can be seen in Dracula's living in Carfax Abbey in London. This Abbey is of course no longer consecrated since Henry VIII closed all religious orders in England. Yet it is a religious symbol, a Catholic symbol, and those who are fighting against Dracula are not Catholics but Protestants, from England, from the United

States, and from the Netherlands. This division of Christianity after the Reformation is thus present in the powerlessness of Christianity against Dracula. If we consider this religious schism in light of the previous one between the Orthodox and Catholic churches, we come to conclusion that the splitting of Christianity into its three main branches over the centuries is responsible for its failure to protect. Once again, this is not stated explicitly in the film but only alluded to: Orthodox Christians stopped the Turks initially, but the Turks were able to advance because the Crusades, fought only by the Catholics, were a failure. Because Catholicism will itself split in two again during the Reformation, the church will fail in preventing Dracula from entering the West, from invading the Christian world. Ironically, it is the breakaway Protestant branch that will put a stop Dracula, but not in any religious way, orthodox or unorthodox.



DRACULA
BY FRANCIS FORD
COPPOLA, 1992

Religion as a weapon

If religion alone cannot protect us, maybe it can provide the weapons necessary to defend ourselves. Here the film, especially with Van Helsing, the great specialist on matters such as these, becomes over-wrought. The first thing he tries to get is knowledge from various books in libraries, and it is here that he learns of the history of Dracula. This knowledge is tied from the very start to black and morbid humor. As he says to his medical students in the Netherlands: "The diseases of the blood, such as syphilis [...]. The very name, venereal diseases, the diseases of Venus, imputes that they are of divine origin and that they are involved in that sex problem about which the ethics and ideals of Christian civilization are concerned. In fact civilization and syphilization have advanced together. (BSD 88)".

In a way, religion is said to provide us with knowledge, but the implementation of that knowledge is not very religious. Religion itself is no help, nor is its knowledge, except when it describes the living customs of the vampire for the hunters to adapt their methods.

The cross as religious icon and epistemological weapon is contradictory in the film. Here, a crucifix is melted by a female vampire, a cross is set on fire by Dracula himself, and Lucy recoils when confronted with a cross and obediently lies down in her coffin berated by Van Helsing,

who repeats over and over again: "This is the Holy Cross. We are strong in the Lord, his power, his might. Lord God is upon us [...]"⁶ Altogether the cross has limited power, and the little power it does have invested in it from time to time is the result of fear, disgust, or repulsion in the vampire. The cross is thus not dangerous per se in a vampire's eyes, but rather a provocation, an obscenity. To show his distaste, Dracula stamps his foot on the floor, and the cross catches fire.

The wafer, too, has extremely limited power. It only marks a vampiric being with a slight superficial burn that is used by Coppola dramatically in the last sequence to show Mina's vampiric nature and infection, and her sudden liberation of this infection after she kills Dracula. Similarly, the holy water used in the Carfax Abbey cannot counter Dracula, who escapes in the shape of a green vapor. Nor can Latin incantations exorcize the vampire. As a matter of fact, standard weapons like swords and guns are more effective in fighting Dracula and protecting one from harm than are all of the religious paraphernalia mentioned, a fact Coppola marginalizes in the film.

If religion cannot provide us with real protection or real weapons, then how can the vampire be defeated? The film, like the novel, is explicit in its answer. The first vampire, Lucy, is destroyed with a stake through her heart (I have already pointed out that it was metal and not wood, let alone ash) and a good cutlass stroke to the neck. The second batch of vampires that are destroyed are the three female vampires in Dracula's castle. Once again, they are kept at bay with a circle of fire and not crumbled wafers or holy water; and they are liquidated on the following morning with a sword that beheads them all. Van Helsing throws their three heads into the abyss and the river – the same river where Elisabeta committed suicide and to which Jonathan escaped. In other words, in receiving the three severed heads, the river has symbolically been purified of Elisabeta's suicide. I say symbolically here and not religiously since suicide can never be purified in religion.

But how can Dracula himself be killed? He can be killed if he is captured before sundown, when he becomes powerful again. This fails, of course, for when he is attacked with weapons and his throat is half slit, and a sword is plunged into his heart, he is still not completely dead. He lay helpless in the chapel on the altar steps, in the same place and position where he had found the dead Elisabeta, but in a completely inverted situation (symbolic regeneration): Mina, Elisabeta's reincarnation, is looking down upon him and is going to complete the task. But Mina's motivation here is not at all to destroy the monster (as the Crew of Light wishes to do in the novel), but rather to save his soul, to liberate him from the powers of darkness and from his damnation. She will press the sword through his heart and cut off his head, but her actions are motivated by love.

This execution is possible because, when she had the opportunity to drink his blood, he reacted so that she would not drink enough to make her transformation complete. She remained a human being despite her vampiric characteristics. On the other hand, Dracula had rediscovered love, which made him prevent her from over-drinking, so that she was only "baptized" into vampirism, as Van Helsing says. Love, and not religious belief, returns his humanity to him, hence his ability to die. He can die in shared love and thus be saved, salvaged, regenerated, and resuscitated to the eternal life of the soul.

Coppola's ending, however, raises a problem of interpretation. What is the meaning of the beheading? What does it bring to the film? We may think of David and Goliath at first, but that biblical story does not fit here because we systematically have, in the prior beheading episodes, a sexual divide between the beheaded and the beheader. Moreover, in this last case, it is a woman who is doing the beheading. Answers to this problem may best be explained with reference to

the book of Judith in the Old Testament. Judith is a Jewish widow in Bethulia, an unknown city that controls “the only means to access to Judaea” (Judith 4:7), and decides, on the order from “Joakim the high priest resident in Jerusalem at the time” (Judith 4:6), to save Israel of sure destruction when the general-in-chief of the Assyrian army, Holofernes, comes in the name of Nebuchadnezzar to punish the tribes, Israel among others, for not having answered his call some time before in his campaign against Arphaxad. Judith criticizes the elders and other people in the town who only lament and beg God for help, a God that should be neither coerced nor cajoled as she says (Judith 8:17). She then leaves the elders and the town and calls upon Holofernes to pardon her because she rejects her coward tribe. Flattered, Holofernes falls into her sexual trap; she gets him drunk, so that she will not be soiled, and cuts off his head with his own scimitar and brings it back to Bethulia. This steels the Jews in battle, and they defeat the general-less Assyrian army.⁷

There are striking similarities between the stories of Judith and Mina in Coppola’s film, echoed in Jonathan’s declaration at the end when Mina enters the chapel with the dying Dracula: “Let her go. Now her time has come” (BSD 161).⁸ Similar, too, is Mina’s apparent betrayal of her fellow human beings. But the main difference is that there is real love between Mina and Dracula, and that she will behead him not to destroy him but to absolve him, that is, not to bring her fellow human beings to fight and defeat an army, but to destroy the possibility of there ever being such a war in the first place. As Van Helsing says, speaking of Dracula to Mina: “His salvation is his destruction” (BSD 139).⁹ Van Helsing’s meaning is thus not negative, in the way a drunk man may be emasculated by a woman; rather it bespeaks the salvation of a reprieved soul by a woman in the name of and thanks to mutual love. The biblical reference does not bring the meaning into the tale but tremendously reinforces that meaning through the contrast.

But once again the reference is not explicit. It is part of our culture, or at least it has to be in order to be understood (so that we can understand this understood meaning in the film). To many in Coppola’s audience, not all of these religious allusions reach a conscious level. For many, the beheading scene would no doubt recall action films that abound in beheadings, such as *Highlander* for example, even if in Russell Mulcahy’s film the fighters are necessarily men. But a contemporary audience is able to look beyond the sexual divide as if it were meaningless, which it never is of course, even if this meaninglessness is in itself meaningful in a postmodern perspective.

The film and today’s religious debates

Coppola’s film is not concerned with the raging debate on Jesus’ bloodline, his relationship to Mary Magdalene, or even the Templars; such concerns emerged a decade later with Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*, the bestseller that set the whole religious landscape on fire.¹⁰ Yet the film is in concert with the literary debate over the nature of vampires taking place at the time between two of the most recognizable names in fantastic and horror literature.¹¹ Stephen King and his *‘Salem’s Lot* (the novel came out in 1975, the TV mini series that became the first film in 1979, and *Return to ‘Salem’s Lot* in 1987¹²) gives the standard image of the vampire: a monster that has to be destroyed by any means. The films produced from this novel are even pushing this image of the vampire to such an extreme that it has nearly become farcical. Anne Rice, on the other hand, has built her Vampire Chronicles (including the first three novels, *Interview with the Vampire*, 1976; *The Vampire Lestat*, 1985; *The Queen of the Damned*, 1988; as well as in the more recent novels dedicated to her cast of vampires¹³), around a historical lineage of the undead, who witness humanity’s evolution cross the many centuries that they live, keeping their human per-

sonalities beyond their death and rebirth. Coppola draws from both Gothic masters in his film, starting with the traditional image of the vampire (though not reduced to the caricature of the monster that King uses), and moving slowly toward human regeneration through Mina's reincarnation of Elisabeta. Dracula becomes a witness of the past who recovers his humanity through his destruction, which is also his salvation. Coppola surely could not have been ignorant of these contemporary portrayals of vampires and thus consciously positioned his Dracula in between the two paradigms.

Yet Coppola's film does carry religious import and does have an impact on the present religious debate that widens the scope of the film more than makes it appear archaic. The first element is the apocalyptic vision, but a real apocalypse: the Turks' destruction of Christianity. The response to this apocalypse is another apocalypse, reduced visually to the impaled bodies of Vlad Țepeș's victims writhing on their stakes. The color of these apocalypses is of course red, the color of blood, fire, anger, and Dracula's armor. This apocalyptic vision is even transferred onto the chapel scene when Dracula causes the blood from the cross to flood the church (the image of the flood is dominant in John's *Book of Revelation*, in all possible material realizations). The reference to the dragon at this moment, Dracula being a member of the Order of the Dragon, is also an allusion to the dragon in the Apocalypse. But the reference is inverted: the dragon is on the side of the church, and it is this inversion that may pervert the tale. The dragon turns against the church either because he is a dragon and cannot be anything but the Beast in a standard reading of the *Book of Revelation*, or because the church is the real beast that betrays him, its most loyal servant. In the *Book of Revelation* is a story of a pregnant woman who is protected from on high against "a huge red dragon which had seven heads and ten horns, and each of the seven heads crowned with a coronet. Its tail dragged a third of the stars from the sky and dropped them to the earth" (*Revelation* 12:3-4). And it is only when the dragon fails at capturing the pregnant woman that "the dragon delegates his power to the beast" (*Revelation* 12:17). In applying this story to Coppola's film, Dracula becomes the beast when the church fails to protect Elisabeta against the Turks and against her eventual suicide. The pattern is similar but inverted since Dracula is not after the woman but the Turks, not serving his own interest but serving the interest of the church, and not coveting the woman but in love with her; the woman is not protected and sent to some haven but rather left unprotected and abandoned to her death.

In addition to the purifying powers of love, damnation and salvation provide the film its major themes. Damnation is obvious in Dracula's desecration of the chapel, having committed an unpardonable sacrilege. But damnation is constantly present for other characters as well, particularly Lucy and then Mina. Here the vision is simply puritanical: evil, as represented by Lucy after her transformation, has to be destroyed. But unlike with Dracula, Lucy is not given a choice. She is mesmerized into falling and being damned, in the same manner that Mina is. Neither is given a choice (save Dracula's later insistence that Mina not drink too much from his breast), and choice is the necessary element for goodness to carry any meaning. As Milton demonstrates in *Paradise Lost*, if there is no possible choice, man is not responsible for the acts he commits, good or evil. Those acts thus have no ethical value. Regarding Lucy, we decide that what she is doing is evil, and we destroy her to save ourselves. Her salvation, if she is indeed damned from the start, is not even taken into account. There is no considering her fate among the men who accept to hunt her down, including her husband.

On the other hand, Mina is given a choice because Dracula limits her damnation, and she takes full responsibility for her fate when she is confronted with killing Dracula. In Miltonian terms, her acts are absolutely ethical, positive or negative, because she chooses to do what she

does. Here we have the reversal of Christ's story. Apart from the fact that Dracula drank Christ's blood pouring from the cross and became a vampire because of the way he got that blood, he has to die to be saved, to shed his blood to be liberated of the damnation of which he is victim. By dying, he does not save anyone except himself, though we could say he saves the world from the damnation he represents for human beings, which would be the traditional puritanical view that deprives man of free choice. On Mina's side, she has to kill Dracula in order to save him, to save herself, and to save the world. Christ's fate is inverted once again. Salvation is no longer a story of a man who is killed to save mankind but a woman who kills to protect humanity. This inversion is Coppola's fundamental Christian message in the film.

Conclusion

On one side is the Lamb, Christ. He is a willing victim who sacrifices himself to save humanity from damnation. By being shed, his blood saves others, and the blood rite that comes from it is to remind us of his sacrifice. On Judgment Day, however, the Lamb will kill in the name of God to rid the world of sin, evil, and the Beast and enable those who can be saved to live in the messianic Jerusalem. The Lamb is thus delivering fire, hail, rain, floods, and plagues onto the world to destroy the whole of sinning humanity and to preserve its saints. Distinguishing good from evil can only be achieved in death, according to the Pauline doctrine.

On the other side is Dracula, who cannot be understood alone. He has to be taken in connection with his love for Mina-Elisabeta. He starts as a blood shedder, and a particularly cruel one at that. He then makes the choice to become a monster out of spite and anger, what Mary Magdalene would call "foolish wisdom" or "wrathful wisdom" (Gospel according to Mary Magdalene 8:19). Then he has to be sacrificed to be saved. His blood saves him and eventually the one he loves since he will not be able to destroy her. His death saves humanity of his own menace. In other words, he is a complete Antichrist. When Dracula is finally saved, there will be no need for his second coming.

This Christian metaphor of the salvation of the Antichrist is punctuated with religious elements to emphasize the idea that the Antichrist can only be countered by love, and there we reach the real Christian meaning of Coppola's film. Evil can only be reformed through love: not Jesus' universal love, but a sexual love, even if the two protagonists are now beyond sexuality.

Was Coppola conscious of all this complexity of meaning in producing *Bram Stoker's Dracula*? If we follow the "Making of ..." documentary added to the 1994 video version of the film and later to the DVD, then certainly not. Throughout the long documentary the religious question is reduced to a minimum. Apart from Dracula being referred to as the Devil or Mephistopheles, there is little evidence (save a couple of quotations from the film itself) to suggest Coppola was forthright in his religious intent. In fact, the documentary concentrates on the working methods of Coppola as a director more than on the meaning of the film. In 1992, the situation was not ripe for an earnest religious debate on the film. The fact that the film was shot in 1992 may explain why some of the religious meaning in it is left more to innuendo, subliminal allusions, or understood references. Audiences had not yet discovered the *Opus Dei*. The film's religious meaning seems to be nearly incidental, which is regretful because its myths are universal and absolutely crucial to the history of humanity and the invention of religions. Religions, all of them, have one primeval objective: to protect the believers against blood-curdling and blood-thirsty violence by cultivating human ethics in human beings. Dracula, the myth of the vampire, of the blood drinking tyrant or monster, is always present in religious mythologies. He is there in the *Book of Revelation*, and in Isaiah and Ezekiel. He is Bel or Baal, the dragon, the Beast, the

monster omnipresent in so many of the later books of the Old Testament that it is impossible to exclude them from the field of dragon-cultivating mythologies. Even Moses' bronze serpent appears as a form both of punishment and of protection from God, who is called a "seraph", derived from the angel "seraphim", which is represented as a winged dragon (Numbers 21:1-9).

And it is this dimension of mythologies in general that merges all human religions into a universal religious consciousness, even subliminal awareness, that makes the film a film of its time, the postmodern time, a time in which references are intertwined and lack historical objectivity. Maybe something is still rotten in the state of Denmark, but something is definitely queer in the imagination of our time.

As for Coppola's intention, I can only put forward hypotheses. Coppola, though, seems to use the cinematographic medium as a way to convey meaning through images, always keeping the various sides balanced so that the film remains understandable, in one way or another, by all members of the audience. It is a commercial necessity, of course, one which corresponds to the spirit of our day. Maybe this spirit has been created by the commercial intentions of the medium (where the medium is the message), or the spirit of the day has emerged from history itself and has invested the medium with its essence (where the message is the medium). Does postmodernity emerge from the market economy in the field of ideas, ideologies, and cultural constructions, or does it come from the slow and steady evolution of the human species in its historical adventure? We cannot know for sure. We might even say that this market economy can be seen as part of this historical adventure in what some identify as a dialectical though not antagonistic relation. For sure, great filmmakers like Francis Ford Coppola go along with the spirit of their time, trying to satisfy their own artistic needs in addition to the commercial needs of their audiences. In *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, Coppola attempts to connect as many people in the audience as possible beyond their various divides – sexual, social, economic, cultural, artistic, religious, or whatever.

Endnotes:

This essay first appeared in *Post/modern Dracula: From Victorian Themes to Postmodern Praxis*, edited by John S. Bak (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007).

¹ See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964).

² Some commentators have claimed that 666 is the total of the number values of "Nero-Caesar" (in Hebrew).

³ See Steve Ellis, ed., *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴ Richard Andrews and Paul Schellenberger, *The Tomb of God: Unlocking the Code to a 2000-year-old Mystery* (London: Time Warner Books, 1996).

⁵ Queer theory can help explain the sexual dimensions of the film, for while Dracula is not gay, there is no real sexual limit to his thirst; he drinks out of necessity, male and female victims alike. Jonathan, on the other hand, has limits since he is attracted to the female vampires, in the same way Lucy and Mina are drawn to Dracula. Anne Rice will use this sexually-ambivalent tradition widely with her vampire Lestat de Lioncourt, who definitely has a gay, or a campy, side. Coppola uses this gay element parsimoniously but effectively, which is also how we should view the queer in the film.

⁶ This line does not appear in the screenplay.

⁷ See École Biblique de Jérusalem, *La Bible de Jérusalem* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1998), and Alexander Jones, ed., *The Jerusalem Bible: Reader's Edition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

⁸ The line in the screenplay reads: "Let her go. Our work is finished here. Hers is just begun".

⁹ The line in the screenplay reads: "Your salvation is his destruction".

¹⁰ See, for instance, Robert Eisenman, *James: The Brother of Jesus* (London: Watkins Publishing, 2002).

¹¹ See Peter Haining, ed., *The Vampire Omnibus* (London: Orion Books, 1995); Byron Preiss, ed., *The Ultimate*

Jacques Coulardeau

Dracula (London: Headline Book Publishing, 1992); and Alan Ryan, ed., *The Penguin Book of Vampire Stories* (London: Penguin, 1987).

¹² Stephen, King, *'Salem's Lot* (New York: Doubleday, 1975).

¹³ These nine novels, all published by Knopf, are: *The Tale of the Body Thief* (1992), *Memnoch the Devil* (1995), *Pandora* (1998), *The Vampire Armand* (1998), *Vittorio, The Vampire* (1999), *Merrick* (2000), *Blood and Gold* (2001), *Blackwood Farm* (2002), and *Blood Canticle* (2003).

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VIZIJA RELIGIJE U DRAKULI BRAMA STOKERA FRENSISA FORDA KOPOLE

Sažetak:

Tekst razmatra zašto film *Drakula Brama Stokera* Frensisa Forda Kopole ima tako religiozni karakter, te pokušava da ustanovi koliko je sam reditelj o tome imao svest, odgovarajući na pitanja: da li film nudi uobičajenu viziju vampira kao neprijatelja koji se mora uništiti ili, pak, pokušava da ponudi nešto drugo? Drugim rečima, da li je Kopola na liniji Stivena Kinga, koji vidi vampire kao monstume koji moraju nestati radi našeg dobra ili deli poglede En Rajs koja ih doživljava kao drage monstume (ako uopšte monstume) i izrazito ljudska bića (čak i ako oni to više nisu), koja se mogu posmatrati kao reinkarnacije Isusa Hrista pošto, kao i on, imaju moć da spasu čovečanstvo? Ili Kopola sledi svoju sopstvenu viziju, ako uopšte i jednu?

(KATEGORIJA ČLANKA: NAUČNI ČLANAK – KRITIKA)