



© 2020 The Wheel.
May be distributed for
noncommercial use.
www.wheeljournal.com

Dracula (Gary Oldman) at the funeral of Mina Murray (Winona Ryder) in Francis Ford Coppola's film *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, 1992.

CONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES

What I Learned From *Dracula*: Death Between East and West with the Undead

Katherine Kelaidis

When I was a young girl in the western United States in the 1990s, the portrayals of Orthodox Christianity and Orthodox Christians in the popular culture I consumed were thin on the ground, to say the least. The weddings on television shows looked nothing like the weddings of my cousins, where I was expected to serve as flower girl or junior bridesmaid, in scratchy petticoats and too much eyeshadow. The funerals in movies bore no resemblance to anything in my life either. Except for a single episode of *Seinfeld* in which George Costanza (Jason Alexander) contemplated becoming Latvian Orthodox, the only place I ever saw Orthodox Christians onscreen was in . . . vampire movies. If you, like me, are a horror film aficionado, you know ex-

actly what I am talking about. The unsuspecting traveler arrives at a castle in Transylvania, where he is greeted by the all-too-knowing townsfolk. Among them, almost always, is the black-robed cleric, phelonion and pectoral cross on prominent display. Even when the plots of these films move out of Romania, the aesthetic of Eastern Christianity remains (even if there is nothing particularly Orthodox in them beyond aesthetics). These films come by this visual veneer honestly. Pop culture vampire lore is derived almost exclusively from the Irish novelist Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula*. Stoker spent seven years prior to writing the novel researching Central and Eastern European folklore, and based much of his novel on a collection of Tran-

¹ Álvaro García Marín, “‘The Son of the Vampire’: Greek Gothic, or Gothic Greece?” in *Dracula and the Gothic in Literature, Pop Culture and the Arts* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016), 23.

The possible grave of Vlad Dracula (c. 1430–76) at Sna-gov Monastery, Romania. Photo: fusion-of-horizons / CC BY 2.0.

sylvanian tales by the Scottish writer Emily Gerard. The name Dracula is taken from Vlad the Impaler, Vlad Dracula, a fifteenth-century ruler in what is today Romania. Famed for refusing to pay homage to the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II (the conqueror of Constantinople), Vlad is today a Romanian national hero. While some sources suggest Vlad ultimately converted to Catholicism, the Romanian Orthodox have resolutely denied it, insisting that the man who inspired Dracula is one of their own. And so, vampires in the West look, well, Orthodox. Which says a good deal about how the Christian East is viewed in the West: dark, mysterious, superstitious, and not a little bit frightening.

What is truly shocking, however, is that if Bram Stoker had set pen

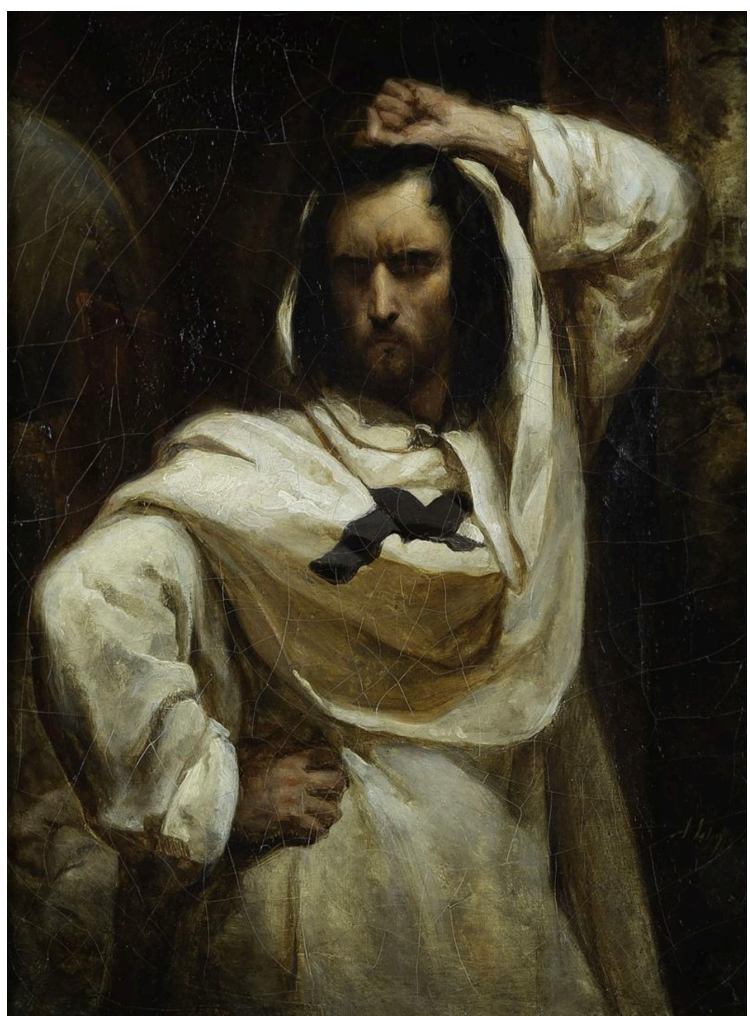
to paper in 1797, and not 1897, it is very likely that Dracula—and by extension all modern vampires—would be Greek, not Romanian. As Álvaro García Marín has brilliantly demonstrated, Greek vampires, both the *vrykolakas* of mainland Greece and the *katakhanas* of Crete, began to appear in Western cultural contexts around the Renaissance. They reached the height of their popularity in the West around the beginning of the eighteenth century, at the dawn of the Enlightenment. The rise of the Greek vampire in the Western imagination thus corresponds to the period in which ancient, pre-Christian Greeks were being transformed in the Western mind into the founders of Western civilization, and Western artists and scholars were constructing “the fiction of a Western incor-



poreal mental and epistemological space founded on a non-mediated continuity with Ancient Hellenes.”¹ This rarefied, mythologized ancient Greece was frequently juxtaposed against the othered (and notably orientalized) modern Greek, who was backward and superstitious and whose character and culture was fundamentally at odds with modernity: “Greekness, a historical revenant on its own, presents itself to modern Europeans as familiar and strange at the same time, the ideal summit of civilization towards which the West must always progress, and the Other in/of the Occident.”²

The role of Orthodoxy in the othering of the post-antique Greek cannot be understated. Western perceptions of Orthodoxy, and in particular Orthodox “difference,” have been a principal driver in the othering of not only Greeks, but Slavs and other “Eastern” Europeans as well. And the division within Christendom has always been a problematic feature of any conceptualization of the West.

Vampires have featured so heavily and persistently in this history of otherness, from the Greek vampires of the Renaissance to the Romanian ones of Bram Stoker, because they personify so much of what the West finds in equal parts seductive and repulsive about Orthodox culture, responses emanating from a difference arising from very different perspectives on death which emerge from the two great halves of the Christian world. Understanding this difference and the Western response to it—embodied in the Western pop-culture vampire—raises two questions: what do vampires mean, and what do they say, as a mythic archetype, about our view of death? For it is only after answering these two fundamental ques-



tions that we can begin to understand why the vampire has become the most persistent image of the Christian East in the West.

Christianity is not, despite what we might believe from reading blogs, primarily an ethical system. Christian ethics as such is something of an afterthought. Instead, Christianity is really a *mythos* narrating the triumph of the living God over death, the last of the surviving mystery cults of the late Roman Empire. Christianity’s most central and radical claim has nothing to do with abortion or “family values.” Neither does the revolutionary message of the gospel arise principally from the rejection of income inequality or the embrace of

The protagonist of Lord Byron’s poem *The Giaour* (1813), about a Christian warrior in Ottoman Greece who is cursed to become a *vrykolakas* or vampire. Ary Scheffer, *The Giaour*, 1832. Musée de la Vie romantique, Paris.

Ibid., 24.

outsiders. Christianity's most radical, revolutionary, and transformative claim is that we are living in the period *after* the complete destruction of death at the hands of the Source of Life. The fundamental promise of the Christian faith is that our bodies will be reanimated, along with our souls, at the time of the general resurrection. Christianity is the story of death, life, and resurrection, for both God and his creation.

While this basic trajectory transcends confessional borders within Christendom, it has been interpreted in distinct ways. In the West, under the influence of an intellectual history that has trended toward increasing rationalism from the Middle Ages onward, the Christian cosmology of death has been routinely compartmentalized, sanitized, and metaphorized. This tendency is epitomized in the Refor-

mation's rejection of the veneration of saints, and even—in some more radical parts of the Protestant tradition—prayers for the dead. The world of the living is increasingly separated from that of the dead, thus altering the implications of Christianity's central myth. In the East, however, the ancient continuity between the world of the living and the dead has largely been maintained. And in both theological discourse and folk practice, the Orthodox world is one in which the dividing wall between life and death remains thoroughly destroyed.

Along with saints and spirits, vampires are one of the creatures that cross over this eradicated border. Notably, the story of the vampire is also a story of death, life, and resurrection, an evil mirror of the Christian promise of the Resurrection. In these stories, vampires receive a condition-

Dracula (Bela Lugosi) rises from his coffin in *Dracula*, 1931.



al immortality through their covenant with evil (and, frequently, an explicit covenant with Satan) in much the same way that the Christian believer receives immortality through the covenant with Christ. Yet the vampire's immortality, unlike that of the Christian, is conditional and subject to revocation. Importantly, the ways in which a vampire's immortality might be terminated are connected, both in folk practice and in literature, to the institutional Church. It is the Church's prayers, priests, and relics that defy and destroy the immortality granted to the vampire *vis-à-vis* his contract with evil. These are, of course, the very same prayers, priests, and relics which ensure the immortality of the believer, mediating between the individual Christian and Christ.

Another recurrent feature of vampire lore is the way in which a dead person becomes an undead vampire. Every vampire is created by contamination. Anyone familiar with Hollywood vampire films knows the type of contamination most common in popular culture: the bite. In folklore, however, it is far more common for the vampire to enter his compact with evil through sin or sinful associations in life. The vampires of folklore are almost universally adulterers, schismatics, or (lest we ever escape the anti-Semitism of Orthodox culture) Jewish. Vampires are, therefore, anyone who dies outside the boundaries of the institutional Church. Having died outside the Church, the vampire receives a counterfeit resurrection wholly unlike the true one offered by Christ. The source of vampires' contamination is a failure to be purified through the Church's prayers, priests, and relics—the very same things that will ultimately cut off the vampire's counterfeit resurrection, guaranteeing that the faithful will be safe from further contamination.

Within its native context, be that Greece, Romanian, or Serbia, these vampire tales operate as a kind of affirmation of the power of the institutional Church within the space of a folk religion where such institutional power is often marginal. However, when transposed into a Western European, non-Orthodox context, the connection of vampire lore to the traditions and practices of the Orthodox Church, no matter how ad hoc or tangential, can become an affirmation of the most negative Western stereotypes of Orthodoxy: a church and a culture that is superstitious, backward, and cruel in its treatment of outsiders (after all, what is crueler than dooming those outside your fold to roam the earth in death hunting the righteous?). In this way, the vampire movies of my youth were a reassertion of the lens through which most of my neighbors, consciously or unconsciously, saw the church of my ancestors.

While the negative, repulsed response of this connection should be clear, what is more mysterious, and perhaps ultimately more illuminating, is the attractive quality of this characterization. Like vampires themselves, the image of the Christian East has always had an allure in the modern West, even as it has simultaneously frightened and disgusted. When we look at the pattern of conversions among people from Western, non-traditionally Orthodox backgrounds, it is hard not to notice the extent to which these conversions are driven frequently (though certainly not always) by two principal rejections: Western liberalism and Western rationalism.

There is little arguing with the fact that many hope to find in Orthodoxy a Christian expression that does not embrace Enlightenment ideals surrounding the freedom of the individu-

al and its associated social ethics, particularly around gender and sexuality. Less frequently discussed (perhaps because sex—and particularly the sexual habits of others—always makes for better conversational fodder) is the extent to which many come to Orthodoxy seeking a less “rational,” more emotive Christian tradition. Nowhere are these two features of Orthodoxy more clearly preserved for the observant inquirer than in the church’s cosmology of death. These two features of Orthodoxy, its anti-liberal ethic and its anti-rationalist cosmology, are also very much on display in vampire folklore and in the vampires of popular culture. In this way, the vampire is not only a symbol of the rejection of the Christian East by the West, but also evidence of what continues to bring many Westerners to the Christian practices of the Orient.

My first vampires were not, shockingly enough, in movies or books. I heard my first vampire story at the knee of my great-grandfather, when

he told me how the village priest who had betrayed his vows was doomed to spend eternity as a *katakhana*. The priest-turned-vampire was not the only character in *Propappou’s* tales that had journeyed back from death. Grandmothers came back from Paradise in dreams to warn or comfort. Medieval saints materialized at dinner tables and demons stalked in dark corners, warded off only by the power of our baptisms. In this world, it was not hard to believe that a priest, denied the resurrection of Christ, would find resurrection through evil. It was only later, strangely in the horror films I came to love, that I realized this world of seamless blending between life and death was not the order of the day in the culture outside my bubble in the Greek diaspora, and that this view of life and death was met by those outside our world with both interest and horror. All I knew is that we showed up in vampire films and nearly nowhere else. And that had to mean something. ✱



Katherine Kelaidis is a resident scholar at the National Hellenic Museum in Chicago. She is a professional historian, trained at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of London.