THROUGH THE EYES OF THE UNDEAD

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Abstract: Vampires have taken many forms over the years, different meanings being enclosed within this myth. For this paper we chose to look at Elizabeth Kostova's novel, The Historian, and at Jim Jarmusch's film, Only Lovers Left Alive, and see what ideas are embodied by the vampire. Although there is no direct connection between the two titles, they can be analyzed together if we wish to write about knowledge, art, life and death when the protagonist has been around for centuries. How do the undead look at people, at the changes of the world? How can this outlook over humanity be translated from fantasy to reality?

Keywords: vampire, Elizabeth Kostova, The Historian, Only Lovers Left Alive, knowledge

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When we are speaking about vampires, whether they appear in literature or in films, we should keep in mind the fact that there are usually several layers to the stories. It is perfectly acceptable to stop and analyze whichever aspect interests us, whether we write about the myth, the dynamics between certain characters or the themes. However, we also have the possibility to go deeper and discover how changes in everyday life influence the way in which the message of a text (regardless of the form it takes) is passed to the audience. We will see what the role played by vampires is in this situation. Why did Elizabeth Kostova and Jim Jarmusch not choose regular people to play the parts of the protagonists? How does the presence of an immortal creature affect the way themes like life or death are touched upon? Let us begin by looking at Kostova's *The Historian*.

The novel was published back in 2005 and it holds a complex plot and many characters – though less than what one might expect from such a long book – all of them playing important parts in the unfolding of the events. Three main time lines are interwoven, the reader being taken to different settings: in the 1930's, 1952 and 1972-1974, from the United States of America all the way to Europe and Turkey. The beauty of it all is that you have the chance to see everything unfold painfully slow in front of your eyes, the tension being built gradually. The most important characters are intellectuals, our link to every time frame and – ultimately – to Dracula himself. We do not actually get to see him in person except for short periods of time, but that is an aspect we shall discuss later on.

As we have mentioned, the most important characters are intellectuals. They share a deep passion for knowledge, going to great lengths for their research. That is something authors do not usually touch upon, especially when writing a vampire novel. We could say that the story opens in medias res, the first ones with whom we come in contact being Paul – a diplomat and a historian – and his daughter (who is sixteen in 1972). The girl is unnamed throughout the novel, even if she is the main narrator. Bartholomew Rossi is another historian, a well-known professor who spent part of his youth attempting to decipher the

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mystery of a strange book bearing the symbol of the dragon[1]. He is the father of Helen Rossi, Paul's future wife, a strong, intelligent woman who gives up everything in order to find a way to rid the world of the vampire's threat. Rossi's story spans over a couple of decades, from the 1930's to 1952, resonating even in 1974. He is one of the ones handpicked by the former warlord to… work for him. He was to catalogue Dracula's library and bring new books in it. In exchange for his services he was to receive from his future master the gift of immortality:

"I have never made a full record of my holdings, of their origins and condition. This will be your first task, and you will accomplish it more swiftly and brilliantly than anyone else would be able to -…-. Your second task will be much larger. In fact, it will last forever. When you know my library and its purposes as intimately as I do, you will go out into the world, under my command, and search for new acquisitions - and old ones, too, for I shall never stop collecting from the works of the past. I will put many archivists at your disposal - the finest of them - and you shall bring more under our power"[2].

This might seem like a tempting offer for a scholar, having the possibility not only to read about history, but to actually live through it and preserve it. However, we are not allowed to forget that this offer comes from a creature of darkness. Accepting it would mean losing one's soul and free will. It might not seem so from the way it is presented, but the moment someone accepts becoming a vampire, he (or she, women are also targeted) becomes in essence a puppet of the master. *The Historian* offers various examples of vampires and it is hinted that there are many more than we could possibly imagine roaming the earth. It would be impossible to say how many of them had become undead willingly and how many were merely victims of a stronger force.

There are many historians presented throughout the novel, but *the* Historian of the title is Dracula himself. The connection with Bram Stoker's book is obvious, the Count's image bringing the two texts together, but also setting them apart. Throughout Kostova's novel we will find references and quotes from *Dracula* and information on vampire lore. But we will also find Stoker's text mentioned more often than not, as if the world described in *The Historian* is not fictional[3], but the one in which we live. It might seem like a far-fetched idea, but we know almost no personal information about the narrator and *Dracula* has been read at some point by most of the characters and used as reference in their research. The unexpected surprise unfolds itself in the "unholy tomb", where the vampire's vast library can be found: Vlad the Impaler himself owns a copy of the book[4].

In *The Historian*, the supernatural crosses over into the historical time, it becomes part of a reality which is familiar to us and changes it in the most unexpected ways. It is implied that vampires might appear where you least expect them[5], from the libraries open to everyone,

[1] Throughout the book we will encounter various similarities between Dracula the vampire and Dracula the voivode.

[2] Kostova, Elizabeth. *The Historian*, chapter 73.

[3] In chapter six, Paul recalls the time Rossi was kidnapped and the information he had received from his mentor: "[Rossi] told me that vampires are real, that Count Dracula walks among us, that I might have inherited a curse through his own research". Only moments after this confession, as if reassuring us and himself that what he had claimed was the truth, he adds: "Rossi was a solid structure, as cool and sane as anyone I've ever met". Therefore, we would have no reason to doubt his words. Paul implies that Rossi can be trusted, since his observations stem from his own experiences, not from superstitions followed mindlessly.

[4] "He brought his great hand to rest on an early edition of Bram Stoker's novel." (Kostova, chapter 73)

[5] Rodica Iulian writes in *Dracula sau triumful modern al vampirului* that, while vampires do not exist, vampirism is present in our world. She does not refer to the fanged creatures, but to the people who feed upon

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to the higher political positions. Dracula is not trapped in the past and he seems already accustomed to the new age. "I know the modern world. It is my prize, my favourite work. -…- The past is very useful, but only for what is can teach us about the present"[6], he tells Rossi with what can only be described as pride. It is a disturbing statement because he does not refer to the progress we have made, but to figures like Stalin or Hitler, rulers who made genocides possible[7]. The monster in him approves of such acts of extreme cruelty, ones which resemble his own deeds while he had been alive. When we add this aspect of his personality to his portrayal as a bibliophile, what we get is the image of the vampire as perceived today: terrifying, but somehow elegant and fascinating.

For such a long text, *the* Historian appears for only a short period of time in person. We follow him along with the other characters, we see his mark on history and feel his presence with every page we turn, in each new place where we are taken. A strange shadow, a lingering, eerie feeling of being watched step by step – not a difficult task, if we take into account the fact that Dracula can change his shape and is strong enough to venture outside his coffin in broad daylight. He is presented to us through Rossi's eyes. The professor, despite being afraid, is capable of writing down a thorough description of the Count:

"Now I could see him better, although his face was still in shadow. He wore a peaked cap of gold and green with a heavy jewelled brooch pinned above his brow, and a massive-shouldered tunic of gold velvet with a green collar laced high under his large chin. The jewel on his brow and the gold threads in his collar glittered in the firelight. A cape of white fur was drawn around his shoulders and pinned with the silver symbol of a dragon. His clothing was extraordinary; I felt almost as frightened of it as I did of his strange undead presence. It was real clothing, living, fresh clothing, not the faded pieces of a museum exhibition. He wore it with extraordinary richness and grace, too, standing silently before me, so that the cape fell down around him like the swirl of snow. The candlelight revealed a blunt-fingered, scarred hand on a dagger hilt, and farther down a powerful leg in green hose and a booted foot. He shifted a little, turning in the light, but still silent. I could see his face better now, and the cruel strength of it made me shrink back - the great dark eyes under knitted brows, the long straight nose, the broad bonelike cheeks. His mouth, I saw now, was closed in a hard smile, ruby and curving under his wiry, dark mustache. At one corner of his lips I saw a stain of drying blood - oh, God, how that made me recoil. The sight of it was terrible enough, but the immediate realization that it was probably mine, my own blood, made my head swim"[8].

This is neither the portrait of a mindless creature who desires only to kill and feed, nor of one who does not know what to do with immortality, remaining bound by the shackles of humanity. This man – if we can call a vampire so – is elegant, handsome, polite and aristocratic, proud of his heritage.

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the energy of those around, who drain their life force and try to destroy everything remotely sacred (with or without the religious connotations) and beautiful.

[6] Kostova, Elizabeth. *The Historian*, chapter 73.

[7] In *Răstălmăcirea lui Țepeș*, Mihai Ungheanu mentions the fact that this idea, that Vlad the Impaler served as an example for other cruel rulers throughout history, does not have a solid base. It is obvious that Ungheanu is against such a portrayal of the voivode and we can assume that he would not be pleased with the way in which Kostova's Dracula is created when we look at the connection with the historical figure. When speaking of history, we need facts, but those facts could easily be turned into stories. The moment this change takes place, it is easier for readers to look at certain events or characters from a different perspective. In this case, Dracula is hundreds of years old and he shows no traces of remorse or guilt. His quest for knowledge does not focus on issues like love, dreams or beauty.

[8] Kostova, Elizabeth. *The Historian*, chapter 73.

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As we read this passage and as Rossi stands in front of him, the best way to describe the feeling which nudges us is awe. For a moment, we might even forget that the one described is dead, but that drop of blood mocks everything we might come to admire about him and it reminds us of his true nature. His goal is noble[9], but he is still the monster who feasts upon other living beings in order to exist. We are forbidden to forget that there is something else behind this rather charming façade, something evil that should have been long dead and gone. The monster does not need to be grotesque or violent to send chills down one's spine. Dracula is a character who adapted perfectly to immortality, perhaps because he had been seeking it even when he was the ruler of Wallachia and most of the traits he displayed in life were preserved in death, making his continuous presence among mortals an even greater threat. Why? Because immortality and thirst for power and violence do not go well together and the idea that a country might be ruled by a vampire is not one we wish to entertain[10].

The image of the vampire is based on that of Vlad the Impaler, something we already knew. But what is important is the fact that Kostova makes use of legends and stories we, as Romanians, grew up with (the impaling, the punishments applied to the Turkish diplomats, the treatment of his own people), never forgetting to also acknowledge his bravery and intelligence. We see that intelligence and desire for something more in the novel, when he admits his interest in the occult and desire to live through history, refusing to become another one of its victims. He uses his love for books to plan everything for the life awaiting him after death, to achieve his goals. If we were to characterize Dracula[11] in only a few words, those would be "a great, but terrifying man".

In a time when the audience is no longer truly afraid of the undead, Kostova's novel is different, leaving a crack in our sense of security. Her vampires do not fall in love, they are not as weak as we would like to believe and they do not shy away from taking what they need in order to survive: warm blood, pulsing with life. Also, very important, the novel emphasises the importance of a solid education and the pleasure knowledge can bring[12]. Of course, we also get the reverse: too much knowledge in the hands of someone who cannot be destroyed leads to a frightening scenario. After all, we see Dracula interested in the occult, in murders and torture. We can hardly expect leaders like him – no matter how much they might insist on being scholars – to show mercy or even a spark of humanity. Vampirism is no longer perceived as going hand in hand with death, but only with the promise of immortality, people forgetting about the price which needs to be paid in order to have access to power, knowledge and an eternity on earth.

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[9] *Ibidem* "Perhaps you know, Professor, that only about one one-thousandth of the literature ever published is still in existence? I have set myself the task of raising that fraction, over the centuries."

[10] Vampirism is also used here as a means of criticizing communism, the most obvious points being Dracula's admiration for the horrors of the twentieth century (claiming them as his legacy) and the desire expressed more or less directly by those who held political power to offer immortality to someone like Stalin and let him rule a country.

[11] We should keep in mind the fact that the nosferatu always introduces himself as Dracula, never making use of his former name. He keeps countless books about himself in the library, but the only true link with his former life as a Voivode is the symbol of the dragon – one which spreads fear wherever it appears, being seen as something which must be destroyed.

[12] At one point, we are allowed to see Dracula in his library, touching his books with care, speaking about his love for them and describing himself as both a warrior and a scholar. Books were the ones which have kept him company over the centuries, a specific book is his way of tempting his future minions and even the immortal is not immune to the charms of a well-written book (we see him reading in front of Rossi and apparently completely forgetting about his presence there).

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Almost a decade after the novel was published, Jim Jarmusch's film appeared. The vampires created by Elizabeth Kostova, Dracula in particular, crave knowledge, they seek to roam the earth for eternity in search of more information. The Historian does not pay attention to random people. He knows exactly who should be his next victim, what kind of exchange must take place in order to move another step forward towards his goal. He admires intelligence, curiosity, strength... but also all that is bad in a human's soul. If here we meet a brilliant monster who tries to control everything from the shadows, how will vampires present themselves in the 2013 film?

Only Lovers Left Alive is often described as a love story in which the protagonists are immortal. What sets it apart from other similar projects is the way in which the characters think and act. Nothing much happens and there are not many characters, but everyone and everything is brought together in such a way that the ideas reach the viewers with little difficulty. A man and a woman, married and in love for centuries, meet once again to face another piece of eternity together. They are still presented as outsiders. Dracula remained hidden, but still made his presence known in unsettling ways. Adam and Eve are somewhere outside and maybe even above the usual norms of the community, regardless of how large it is. They are interested only in certain aspects of life and have no desire to control anyone.

The characters love each other, their feelings easily overcoming any obstacle. The fact that they are undead only highlights the fact that they have supported one another over time and that their bond makes them stronger even when it seems like their journey through history will soon come to an end. A few words about the kind of vampires we encounter before we move towards their view on knowledge and humanity. We do not know much about the origins of the vampires or if they have the powers we have grown accustomed to encounter in other similar beings. They wear gloves (a certain intimacy is established the moment those are taken off), they drink human blood (biting people is seen as something better suited for the fifteenth century; nowadays there are easier ways to get this... drug), they have fangs and extremely fast reflexes.

The couple can slip in and out of groups of people because they do not stand out too much physically. They are, in the end, artists and they hold themselves with an air of dignity and sometimes snobbery. Danger would not suit their way of "life" and a vampire like Dracula would probably try to eliminate them. Adam and Eve have lived through history, meeting people who have changed the world. They have seen cultures grow and collapse, works of art being created and then ignored... knowledge being pushed to the margins as something deemed unimportant. There, outside the limits imposed by humanity, stand our protagonists, ready to cherish the information they receive, to save it and try to pass on at least a part of it.

There are no interviews where Tilda Swinton and Tom Hiddleston did not speak with fondness and admiration about the characters they brought to life. The actors understand their back stories and communicate with the audience even when no words are uttered. There is no vulgarity in their attitude, even with the occasional swearing. The way they move and speak, the fact that Adam and Eve prefer books, music and comfort, these elements draw the portrait of beings who could easily become a threat, as we see at the end of the film, yet they choose a different path. Having lived for centuries, they are extremely intelligent, creative, lovers of beauty and art. Also, they complement each other, emphasising the fact that they stand for different perceptions of the world as it is today. These are ideas viewers will instantly recognize if they pay attention to what is happening around us. How should we look at the world? As something fascinating, full of wonders? Or as something on the verge of being destroyed, uncaring of what has been lost? The audience is allowed to choose the answer they desire as Jim Jarmusch encloses in his characters these two perspectives.

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Eve has a wise air about her and something almost divine in her approach to life and knowledge. She claims at one point: *life is about surviving things, appreciating nature, nurturing kindness and friendship and dancing.* She is a survivor, apparently much older than her husband and still able to regard the world with something akin to awe. Being able to elegantly adapt to new environments, Eve takes advantage of her immortality and assimilates all that humanity has to offer. We see her reading in a few scenes or dancing with Adam. It is as if she lets the flow of time guide her towards the future, carrying the values of the past with her, but not remaining trapped in the old ways. This ability to look at the world in wonder, while still keeping one's presence hidden, is what enables Eve to live alone peacefully and not slip into depression while witnessing the decay of culture.

Adam does not seem to cope with the situation quite well. From his point of view, most humans are nothing but zombies who are unable to recognize or appreciate art and the works of genius minds. Unlike Tilda Swinton's character, he gives the impression that he carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. He is contemplating death, although not to the point where he would actually put an end to his undead condition. It is not to say that Eve does not have a certain darkness well hidden within her, but she has learnt to control it instead of allowing herself to be controlled. For all the experience he has gained over the centuries, Adam finds it more difficult to adapt and accept the new age. He is mourning a world that is changing into something he no longer understands.

In *Vampire Films*, Michelle Le Blanc and Colin Odell highlight the fact that these films offer not only the possibility to escape reality, but also the chance to explore darker aspects of the human mind. Because we know from the beginning that we are dealing with fantasy, a safe environment is created, a place where people can touch upon more delicate topics in a different way. In this case, Jim Jarmusch makes use of the undead to speak about society and humanity. About the passing of time, the strength of love and the ephemerality of life. Let us imagine that death is no longer a limit... how would this change people? How would they look at the world? The same way as mortals do, it seems. Some would obey instinct and live only for the moment, not caring who has to suffer because of them. Others, like the protagonists, would go on learning. But even here, there are different paths one might follow. Eve is like the ones who choose to focus on the better aspects of the world. Adam misses the past and cannot understand why humans allow fear to limit them, not realizing that he has also limited himself by looking only towards the time gone by.

Both novel and film emphasise the importance of knowledge and the price one has to pay in order to achieve it. One aspect which speaks to the audience is the way in which the plot and the characters are built. There are different perspectives, even if the protagonists have been roaming the earth for centuries. Elizabeth Kostova highlights the fact that someone who enjoys learning could go to great lengths for their passion. However, when is it the right moment to stop? Stepping into the realm of fantasy, she reminds her readers that the most frightening monster is the one you cannot always see, the one who might look like everyone else, but who could easily manipulate or kill anyone without remorse. Too much power and influence in the hands of the wrong person can never lead to peace or true progress. Unlike Dracula, who is a bibliophile and shows interest in the darkest parts of humanity, Adam and Eve come as if to encourage creativity and art. Through their eyes, we see the world as beautiful and unpleasant at the same time. Regardless of the point of view a person chooses to embrace, one of the most important messages sent by *The Historian* and by *Only Lovers Left Alive* is to never stop learning, to never stifle curiosity and creativity.

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