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On Celluloid Carmillas

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For a book that has long dwelt in the shadows of Britain's literary canon, *Carmilla* has exerted a powerful hold on film. To date, at least seven adaptations have been produced, and countless other movies have engaged the text in some way. No doubt, Le Fanu's voluptuous vampire inspires this attraction. With more than three thousand vampire movies made so far, it's safe to say, along with Ken Gelder, that "cinema is—and has been for some time—the rightful place of occupation for the vampire" (1994, 87). An animating medium that works its magic in a simulation of the night, film has played host to the undead as much as the undead have played host to film.

There are many reasons underlying *Carmilla*'s cinematic appeal. The novella is intensely atmospheric, with a gothic setting rich in details of landscape, architecture, and interior decoration. On the one hand, as a novella, it requires no truncation to conform to the standard script length of 100 to 120 pages. On the other hand, its brevity has allowed scriptwriters to develop plot lines and characters. Many filmmakers have also been lured by its tantalizing depiction of lesbianism, using cinema's corporeality—its incarnation of literary characters into fleshly, enacted ones, its visceral stimulation of the nervous system—to render such desire explicit. Finally, we might even say that *Carmilla* gestures constantly toward its own adaptability, for what else is Le Fanu's work but a series of interpretations, recountings, and narrative gaps waiting to be filled in?

Moving chronologically, this essay surveys a range of films that both adapt and allude to *Carmilla*, making a distinction between those movies that clearly model themselves on Le Fanu's narrative (such as *Terror in the Crypt* [1963]) and those that reference it (such as *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust* [2000]). Although the line between adaptation and allusion is notoriously fluid, the essential difference is that an adaptation draws our attention to a single source text, whereas an allusion alerts us to film's inherent intertextuality; as Thomas Leitch phrases it, allusion "shades off into the grammar of film and its collective unconscious" (2008, 123).

Before turning to the movies themselves, we also need to consider how to approach an adaptation. Many viewers expect a movie based on literature, especially nineteenth-century literature, to be "just like the book." Yet the six films that have adapted *Carmilla* differ substantially both from the novella and from each other. Such variation has arguably ensured the continued appeal of *Carmilla*'s raw material—what narrative theorists would term its "*fabula*"—even as the book itself remains somewhat undervalued. Leitch speaks to this possibility when he argues that "texts remain alive only to the extent that they can be rewritten" (2008, 12). Leitch's statement may seem a little presumptuous, but it does well to suggest that we must regard adaptation as an interpretive and creative act, not just an imitative one.

We must also remember that adaptations operate under different modes depending on the ambitions behind them. Following Linda Costanzo Cahir, we can group adaptations into three categories: literal, or those that "reproduce the plot and all its attending details as closely as possible to the letter of the book"; traditional, or those that "maintain the overall traits of the book (its plot, settings, and stylistic conventions) but revamp particular details"; and radical, or those that "reshape the book in extreme and extraordinary ways both as a means of interpreting the literature and of making the film a more fully independent work" (2006, 16–17). Whereas most adaptations fall into the second category, the traditional, those based on *Carmilla* fall largely into the third, radical, a point I return to at the close of this essay.

Like film itself, adaptations are also collaborative efforts enriched and constrained by many factors. Imelda Whelehan points out that potential audiences of even the most widely read classics will be composed primarily of people who haven't read the book. And so any study of an adaptation needs to acknowledge the practical realities involved in producing a commercially successful film—such as cutting anachronistic elements, transforming complex narrative strategies into popular film conventions, and establishing intertextual links with other contemporary movies (1999, 4). The meaning of an adaptation thus depends as much on time period, cultural context, and audience interpretation as it does on the words on a page or the director's camera.

The first film to acknowledge its debt to *Carmilla* is Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr*. Released in 1931, it appeared during the horror genre's first major wave of popularity. In Hollywood, Universal had begun its run of such celebrated classics as *Frankenstein* (1930) and *Dracula* (1931). Meanwhile, Germany's UFA studios were making their own contribution to the genre, producing expressionist masterpieces such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligary* (1920), *Nosferatu* (1922), and *M* (1930). The latter set of movies explores the line between subjectivity and external reality, turning supernatural fantasies into plausible circumstances where the unthinkable becomes true, just as in Le Fanu's work. That's why *Vampyr*'s explicit claim in the opening credits that it is "from Sheridan Le Fanu's *In a Glass Darkly*" seems perfectly congruous.

Yet many a viewer has scratched her head over where the correspondence lies, either with *Carmilla* or with the other stories featured in Le Fanu's collection. Alluding to rather than adapting *Carmilla*, *Vampyr* does depict a female vampire (perversely mutated into a crone) who preys on a teenage girl. But these similarities are ancillary, for the real affinity between novella and film—like that between vampire and victim—lies hidden and deep. Indeed, by directly invoking *Carmilla* without transposing elements of plot, characterization, or setting, Dreyer asks us to think about the relation between *Vampyr* and Le Fanu's work in terms other than conventional adaptation.

Thus, this first example of cinematic engagement with *Carmilla* is also the most complex, for what Dreyer seems most drawn to in Le

Fanu's work is precisely what is most difficult to adapt: human psychology and narrative's inability to explain it. Indeed, Dryer crafts his film directly in contrast to a standard assumption about adaptation: that it should occur only when, to borrow the words of Siegfried Kra-cauer, "the content of a novel is firmly rooted in objective reality, not in mental or spiritual experience" (quoted in Hutcheon 2006, 61). Le Fanu's novella is not only intensely psychological, but also marked by narrative gaps, abrupt transitions, and, because of its multiple framing devices, a peculiar sense that the author has vanished into the story. At the same time, it is filled with arrestive imagery that seems to transcend plot and even language itself. *Vampyr* similarly leaves ambiguous whether the events portrayed are actually happening or whether they exist only in the protagonist's mind. And—much to the confusion of its audiences—it abounds in discontinuous shots, irrational crosscutting, and narrative elisions while presenting some of the most unforgettable images ever to come out of German expressionist film.

Although a few other movies gestured toward *Carmilla* before 1960, it wasn't until this year that cinema began an extensive engagement with the novella, probably for several reasons. First, Western culture witnessed a sexual revolution during the 1960s that conditioned movie audiences to expect franker treatments of sexuality. As a consequence, the censorship codes that had firmly checked cinematic content since 1934 were replaced by a new ratings system. And so the horror genre—a genre fascinated by sex, violence, and the naked body—began to flourish once again after having experienced a quiet death after 1934.

The first movie to adapt *Carmilla* during this period was Roger Vadim's highly romanticized *Blood and Roses* (1960). A radical adaptation, this French film rewrites its source text substantially by transposing time and setting to twentieth-century Italy and radically rewriting or even eliminating all of the book's characters. Among the film's most noteworthy aspects is its redirection of narrative sympathy. In arrant contrast to the novella, which renders Carmilla a secretive and symbolic force, *Blood and Roses* privileges her viewpoint. Point of view

is a controversial topic in adaptation studies because many critics argue that in transcoding a first-person narrative such as *Carmilla* into the “third-person reality” of cinema, we lose the original text’s focus on interiority. Yet as *Blood and Roses* exemplifies, a multitrack medium such as film has a distinct advantage over literature, for it can employ much more than language to render subjectivity.

Vadim’s film uses color, setting, movement, pacing, speech rhythm, music—indeed, the entire palette of cinematic creativity—to turn a superficially objective view of vampirism into a richly subjective experience. Inspired by Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, which was released just as *Blood and Roses* went into production, cinematographer Claude Renoir invests each of his shots with a muted beauty well suited to the supernatural; the film moves languidly; and Carmilla, like Madeline in *Vertigo*, possesses understated elegance, a whispery voice, and a gliding walk. The soundtrack is also hauntingly lyrical, reminding us of Lawrence Kramer’s argument that music in films “connects us to the screen by invoking a dimension of depth, of interiority, borrowed from the responses of our own bodies as we listen to the insistent production of rhythms, tone colors, and changes in dynamics” (quoted in Hutcheon 2006, 156). Most striking, *Blood and Roses* relies on a rarely used technique in cinema—voiceover—to give Carmilla narrative control over the story. This narrational realignment helps ensure that viewers identify with the vampire’s consciousness rather than with the victim’s.

The film’s other noteworthy feature is its transference of Carmilla’s passion onto a man. She spends much of the movie pining away for an already-betrothed Leopoldo, who flatly rejects her advances. As a means of assuaging her loneliness, she succumbs one night to an attack by her ancestor, Marcilla Karnstein. Marcilla’s rejuvenated spirit then occupies Carmilla’s body, and together they bite Leopoldo’s fiancée Georgia and inhabit *her* body; by film’s end, as Leopoldo flies off on his honeymoon with a woman he thinks is Georgia, Carmilla has gotten her man. Whether because of the time period (1960 was still a sexually timid year for cinema) or because of Vadim’s auteurial obsession with heterosexual sex (he is, after all, the man who directed

Barbarella), *Blood and Roses* writes Le Fanu's lesbian romance right out of the narrative.

Another key adaptation of the 1960s is Camillo Mastrocinque's *Terror in the Crypt* (1963). Retaining the principal characters of Laura, Count Karnstein, Carmilla, and her mother, this traditional adaptation follows Le Fanu's plot closely, sets its action within the original setting of nineteenth-century Styria, and maintains Le Fanu's focalization on Laura's consciousness. Here, however, our heroine is cast as a medium tormented by visions of vampire murders (without seeing who commits them, she fears that she is the perpetrator). *Terror* also exemplifies cinema's stirring interest in lesbianism. Indeed, it closely imitates the novella's flirtation with the subject while providing the brilliant addition of a thwarted male lover (Friedrich Klaus) for Laura. Despite an auspicious beginning as Laura's dashing young suitor, the hapless Klaus simply can't compete once Carmilla arrives on the scene (Laura rides off with him at the end, but she looks remarkably disappointed about it).

As we watch this highly stylized movie, it's impossible not to see *Terror in the Crypt* as camp. The essence of camp, as Susan Sontag observed more than forty years ago, is its love of artifice and exaggeration—a trait it shares with the gothic. And, indeed, Sontag informs us that the first “true example” of camp is late-eighteenth-century gothic literature. Just so, for the filmmakers of *Terror in the Crypt* run wild with the gothic dimensions of Le Fanu's novella, producing a film that emphasizes texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content. “Camp,” writes Sontag, “sees everything in quotation marks” (2001, 279, 280). *Terror in the Crypt* accordingly doesn't just give us gothic; it gives us “gothic.” It interrupts its storyline repeatedly with photographic stills of the Karnstein castle and ruined village, as if reminding us—lest we forget—of just what kind of movie we're watching. And no doubt, we would be hard-pressed to find a film more populated by candelabras and diaphanous nightgowns than this one.

Yet, despite all its excess, *Terror in the Crypt* asks to be seen as an “artistic” film. Its black-and-white cinematography is elegant; its script contains powerful dialogue; and it bears no trace whatsoever

of irony. We might make an altogether different argument, however, for Roy Ward Baker's *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), an outrageously lurid film that nevertheless, because of its often close adherence to Le Fanu's characters, settings, and plot, might be classified somewhere between a traditional and a radical adaptation of *Carmilla*. Produced by the British Hammer studios, which released a spate of horror films between 1955 and 1976, this version of *Carmilla* makes no pretense at art. As a consequence, it is the first movie to align Le Fanu's novella with popular culture and its stereotyped associations with "bad taste." Popular culture thrives on emotional and bodily participation rather than with the "aesthetic distancing" of middlebrow or high culture, writes sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1987). And so whereas *Blood and Roses* offers an understated, lyrical inquiry into Carmilla's subjectivity, and *Terror in the Crypt* retells the story of Le Fanu's vampire through its exquisite stylization, *The Vampire Lovers* exploits all the visceral shocks of the book while adding many more of its own.

It indulges in camera sham of all kinds, from using lurid color—which Mike Hammer pioneered—to vaporizing vampires. It also delights in overkill. Every actor overplays his or her role; décolleté abounds; and women's screams often last for upward of half an hour (or so it seems). But its real mark of "bad taste" is its sensationalized treatment of lesbianism. In a clear equation of biting with female orgasm, the film repeatedly depicts Carmilla—wantonly played by the voluptuous Ingrid Pitt—nibbling away on the bare breasts of writhing women. Warned by their associates that they would have to tone down this portrayal or face censorship, Mike Hammer and the director, Roy Ward Baker, maintained their ground by arguing that explicit depictions of lesbianism abound in Le Fanu's novella. *The Vampire Lovers* thus provides a rich example of how filmmakers often claim "fidelity"—a concept that typically connotes conservative values and approaches—in order to ignite their adaptations with salacious or otherwise controversial content and how these adaptations in turn can alter popular perceptions of a book.

Although the relaxation of censorship codes continued to influence cinematic rewritings of *Carmilla* in the 1970s, so did the rise of

feminism and its attendant confusions over sex and marriage. In light of this observation, Vicente Aranda's radical adaptation *The Blood Splattered Bride* (1972) is fascinating. Set in contemporary England, the film retains the principal characters Carmilla and Laura (renamed Susan), while adding a new one in the shape of Susan's husband, Victor Karnstein. Like *Terror in the Crypt*, it also expands Laura's character considerably—this time by casting her as a newlywed bride repulsed by her spouse's amorous advances. Shortly after Carmilla's sudden arrival, Susan begins to fantasize about murdering her husband. One night Carmilla enters their bedroom, and in a series of stunningly gory shots she and Susan try to kill him with a dagger. Replacing sexual desire with cathartic violence, *The Blood Splattered Bride* thus renders Carmilla an avenger rather than a seducer of women.

Several films of the 1970s also revisit *Carmilla* to explore fantasies of feminine revolt or revenge. John D. Hancock's *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* (1971), an allusive revisiting of Le Fanu's text, is one example. Set in contemporary New England, this languid movie reimagines Le Fanu's Laura as Jessica, a young married woman who has just been released from a mental hospital. Along with her husband and family friend, Jessica takes possession of a clammy old house in the country hoping to start fresh. But on their very first night, they encounter Emily, a wayfaring hippie who, at their invitation, decides to remain with them for a short while. She stays and stays (like Carmilla, Emily is a horror of a houseguest), and after both men have been bitten by her, it becomes apparent that Emily is none other than the one-hundred-year-old vampire who in the course of time has attacked all the men in the nearby town. Evoking *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) as well as *Carmilla* in its sympathetic portrayal of a woman whose judgment may be unreliable, *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* asks us to question whether all the events we are witnessing are mental delusions. Is Emily an imaginative projection of Jessica's murderous feelings toward her husband? Of Jessica's frustration with a mental condition that has rendered her sadly dependent on men? The film never makes clear.

Unlike *The Blood Splattered Bride*, the 1978 film *Alucarda*, directed by Juan López Moctezuma, alludes to rather than adapts

Carmilla for its narrative of feminine revenge. Set in an unspecified Mexican village somewhere in the past, it features two young women—the innocent and impressionable Justine (Laura) and the sensuous, lively Alucarda (Carmilla)—who befriend each other while living in a convent. As Alucarda seduces Justine, she gets her to revolt against this oppressive and sexually repressed religious community—a place where nuns self-flagellate and wear clothes stained in their own menstrual blood—by murdering the priest who runs the convent. With its occasional references to Le Fanu’s novella, *Alucarda* can be classified as a self-consciously *transcultural* revisiting of the novel. In writing about this process, Linda Hutcheon notes that the film version typically dilutes the political valence of its source text. Quite the reverse here—for in *Alucarda*, we can see how a seemingly *apolitical* novella can be reactivated for a political purpose, in this case to explore religious dissension in Mexico during the 1960s and 1970s.

Another version of *Carmilla* didn’t appear until 1989, when classic novel adaptation had suddenly achieved unprecedented popularity owing to the commercial success of Merchant-Ivory films such as *A Room with a View* (1985). Produced for *Nightmare Classics*, a TV series that adapted such horror fiction as *Turn of the Screw* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, this traditional adaptation of Le Fanu’s text, also called *Carmilla*, adheres quite closely to its source. No doubt one reason for this fidelity is its television status. As Sarah Cardwell (2007) has demonstrated, televised versions of classic novels tend to be more conservative—both narratively and visually—than their cinematic counterparts. Cardwell traces this conservatism back to television’s earliest days, when it was hampered by technological limitations such as immovable cameras and small studio spaces. As a means of compensating for these constraints, television established a tradition of emphasizing the written word above all other aesthetic aspects of an adaptation. This tradition still lingers, she argues, in adaptations of classic novels (such as those produced by the BBC)—hence, the 1989 *Carmilla*’s retention of much of Le Fanu’s original dialogue, plot points, and characterization. We may also attribute the film’s fidelity to its historical moment; between the mid-1980s and the late 1990s,

adaptations of nineteenth-century literature tended to boast increasingly high production values; “authentic” costuming; “great” actors (George C. Scott stars in this TV film as Laura’s father); and an almost fetishistic attention to landscape, buildings, and interiors (Cardwell 2007, 189).

The film does perform one major operation on its source text, however: it relocates the setting from Styria to post–Civil War Georgia. In doing so, it “indigenizes” *Carmilla* for an American audience—that is, it links vampirism to the most traumatic moment in US history and exploits the American South’s own associations with gothicism. The film unfortunately also posits a troubling correlation between vampirism and the African American servants who populate its narrative; armed with voodoo beads and some kind of inexplicable insight, they all recognize Carmilla’s devilry, while the white folks of the film remain stunningly oblivious. Such an absurd addition to an otherwise impressive film testifies to how the act of adaptation can either “correct” the political errors of a source text (as in recent productions of Shakespeare’s notoriously sexist *Taming of the Shrew*) or wind up offending audiences unnecessarily.

Within the past several years, a surprising number of films have used *Carmilla* as source material for their plotlines and characters. *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust* (2000), a Japanese anime film directed by Yoshiaki Kawajiri, features an ancient vampire called “Carmilla,” who, interestingly enough, turns out to be the arch villain of the film. In *Carmilla: The Lesbian Vampire* (2004), an adolescent heroine named Jenna and her father must battle Carmilla, a young woman responsible for a vampiric plague that has infected a small American town. Soon enough, Jenna and her father are waging war against zombies, cannibals, and vampires at every turn in scenes deliberately reminiscent of David Lynch’s horror films. *Lesbian Vampire Killers* (2009), a British horror/comedy, revolves around two down-on-their-luck slackers who liberate a rural village from a swarm of female vampires when they manage to resurrect and then kill “Queen Camilla,” the ancient vampire responsible for turning the village’s women into murderous lesbians.

All the films discussed in this essay constitute a cinematic history quite different from that of most other nineteenth-century fiction. True, we can now see freewheeling versions of novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* as we move more and more into an ironic and intertextual film age. But such radicalism is a recent phenomenon. Since roughly the 1930s, adaptations of classic novels have been driven by two impulses: nostalgia and reverence. Film versions of *Carmilla*, in contrast, seem driven by a will to dissect. This brings to mind Umberto Eco's observation that "[i]n order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, and unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole" (1990, 198). Le Fanu's story has indeed become something of a cult object over the years, and it has achieved this status precisely because filmmakers have been so willing to "break, dislocate, and unhinge it." Whether such readiness has to do with *Carmilla*'s status as "popular" fiction or with Le Fanu's lingering reputation as a "hack" writer or even with the transmogrifying nature of the vampire herself, it's impossible to say. What is clear is that *Carmilla*'s cinematic history provides us with a wonderfully unfettered model for translating page to screen: a model that may well be adaptation's future. And yet even as I write this essay (2011), what promises to be the closest adaptation of Le Fanu's novella to date—Paul Wiffen's *Carmilla*—is currently in production. Boasting the tag line, "At last, J. Sheridan Le Fanu's famous lesbian vampire sees the light of day," the film may well be read as answering our occasional need for fidelity even to those texts that, like *Carmilla*, seem to resist it.