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Blade: A Return to Revulsion

James Craig Holte

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In a forthcoming study of the figure of Dracula in comic books, Donald Palumbo places this "scorned" medium in a clearly articulated critical and historical perspective. Observing that to this day comic books as a narrative vehicle are still almost completely ignored by critics, he finds much of the explanation in "several wide-spread and tenacious misconceptions supported by a few 'fifties-era sociological studies" (such as Fredric Wertham's particularly influential *Seduction of the Innocent*[1]) that castigated the comics:

> These mid-century studies perceive comic books not only as a medium marketed essentially to a vulnerable and undiscriminating audience of children, but also as the vehicle for badly-illustrated cartoon versions of such low-brow literary genres as detective, western, horror, fantastic, and science fiction – pulp-narrative that were nearly as likely as the comics to elicit scorn in the 'fifties, even when their narratives were not presented via a medium that many infer is sub-literate only because it communicates primarily through pictures.

But while, as Palumbo hastens to add, "these various genres of popular literature have enjoyed a distinct critical rehabilitation in the past several decades" to the point that the comic book emerged as a respectable literary form in the 1980s, the general perception of the comic-book medium itself has not greatly changed. He contends, however, that "a close and unbiased look at typical mass-market comic books published since the 'fifties clearly reveals that comic books can and often do have significant literary merit in the traditional sense, and for this reason can be profitably analysed through the same methodologies applied to elite literature."

Palumbo's findings parallel those of film scholars. Not so long ago film was "the movies" and the only movies considered worthy of critical were a handful of "art films" created by a short list of recently-canonized auteurs. For many, in and out of the academy, films are primarily entertainment and film study a guilty pleasure. And although film studies is a growing part of the academic scene, what is considered a film worthy of academic study is often limited to the "literary cinema."

Just as comic books remain suspect, film adaptations of comic books, while popular, have also seen little critical and/or academic attention. One need only think of such films as Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978), Robert Altman's *Popeye* (1980), Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), and Bryan Singer's *X-Men* (2000). Receiving even less attention was the child of two scorned parents, a film adaptation of a comic book series based on vampire fiction, *Blade.* And like examinations of other products of the popular culture, an analysis of *Blade* and its popularity reveals a great deal about ourselves and our culture.

In the summer of 1998 director Stephen Norrington achieved a measure of success with his New Line Cinema vampire film, *Blade*, seldom attained in the history of vampire cinema. For two weeks in August *Blade* was the top grossing (pun perhaps intended) film in the United States. The most popular movie in America was a vampire film, and it was a vampire film unlike such earlier successful vampire films as Stan Dragoti's comic *Love at First Bite* (1979), John Badham's romantic *Dracula* (1979) or Francis Ford

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Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), films that, because of their literary sources, had achieved a measure of respectful attention despite falling under the rubric of the popular horror genre.

In this film the old-world formalities are forgotten, and there is little romance, dark or light, the primary attraction of much contemporary vampire fiction. Unlike much recent vampire cinema and the popular novels of Chelsea Quinn Yarbro and Anne Rice, which celebrate intelligent, sympathetic, and romantic vampires, *Blade* is a throwback to an earlier vision of the vampire as a bloodthirsty monster that looks on humanity as simply a source of food. In *Blade* vampires are vicious, vampires hunt humans, and the screen is full of blood and body parts. Norrington's film avoids the often tedious and tortuous metaphysical and metaphorical speculations about the nature of the vampire in a postmodern world; instead *Blade* foregrounds the conflict between vicious evil and heroic good, an old-fashioned but effective narrative strategy and one that has been ignored by many of the creators of the kinder gentler vampires which have appeared in the popular culture over the past thirty years. It is very much a throwback to the bad old comic books much maligned in the 1950s, and that is part of the film's attraction.

Blade is a half-human, half-vampire character adapted for the screen from Stan Lee's Marvel Comics universe, and much in the film reflects that pulp background. In fact, both the virtues and the vices of the film are directly related to Norrington's use of comic book conventions in his adaptation. *Blade* is a visually stunning narrative with a series of dramatic sequences linked together through the adventures of an attractive superhero confronting absolute evil; unfortunately *Blade* is also devoid of an intelligent plot or a coherent context. The film is, quite simply, a comic book translated to the large screen, and many viewers seem to enjoy the guilty pleasures that it offers to them.

Blade, played enthusiastically by Wesley Snipes, an accomplished black actor with over thirty screen credits, is a vampire with a bad attitude. His mother was bitten by a vampire while she was pregnant, and as a result Blade is part vampire and part human. The ultimate outsider searching for his identity, he is out of place in both the human and vampire worlds. He was adopted and trained as a vampire killer by a vampire-hunting mentor named Whistler (Kris Kristofferson), who plays his role as a cross between Willie Nelson and Professor Van Helsing and is by far the most entertaining character in the film. Blade is a lethal legend to the undead who have begun to come out of their coffins to take over many of the criminal activities in urban America, specializing in after-hours vampire clubs where they can flaunt their powers before awe-struck humans and then feed on them. The leader of the vampire forces is Deacon Frost (Stephen Dorff), another half-vampire, half-human who has chosen the dark side of his heritage and is planning a public vampire crusade against humanity with the goal of conquering the world and turning humanity into a managed food source. It is interesting to note that comic-book villains seem to be obsessed with the notion of taking over the world; Dracula merely wanted to move to London. Frost's vampire rival is Dragonetti (Udo Keir), the leader of the traditional vampires who wish to remain unknown and in the dark and are appalled by Frost's willingness to make the existence of vampirism known. At the beginning of the film Blade encounters a beautiful hematologist named Karen Jensen (N'Bushe Wright) who has been bitten by a vampire and attempts to save her from undeath with infusions of his mentor Whistler's liquid garlic serum that keeps him from needing to feed on human blood. Neither the civil war in the vampire community nor the reluctant vampire motif is original; the first is an essential part of Anne Rice's early novels in the Vampire Chronicles and the second is a staple of *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*. Nevertheless, they do provide some motivation for the visual mayhem in this action-driven film.

The plot of *Blade*, such as it is, is built around a series of action sequences in which Blade confronts an increasingly angry and violent gang of vampires while attempting to keep himself and Dr Jensen from becoming fully vampiric. The confrontations build in blood and gore until Blade and Frost, who has sacrificed Dragonetti and the other senior full vampires in order to call the ancient vampire god to earth to lead the forces of darkness against humanity, fight a duel to the death in the Temple of Eternal Night. Of course, good triumphs over evil. The film is far better than the summary, however, primarily because of its visual elements, which recreate on screen the intensity of comic book art, and the performances of Snipes and Kristofferson, who play their roles with Marvel(ous) enthusiasm.

For a mere "horror thriller" *Blade* received a number of favorable reviews. For example, Roger Ebert, in his 21 August 1998 *Chicago Sun Times* review wrote of *Blade:*

> At a time when too many movies are built from flat-TV-style visuals of people standing around talking, movies based on comic books represent one of the last best hopes for visionary filmmaking. It's ironic that the comics, which borrowed their early visual style from movies, should now be returning the favor. *Blade* ... is a movie that relishes high visual style. It uses the extreme camera angles, the bizarre costumes and sets, the exaggerated shadows, the confident cutting between long shots and extreme closeups. It slams ahead in pure visceral energy.

Three particular scenes illustrate this "pure visceral energy" that is the most effective part of *Blade* and was the most attractive and powerful element in the classic comic books of the 1950s. The first occurs early in the film and establishes its basic conflict. A helpless human is lured by a beautiful vampire into an after-hours vampire nightclub in which the living mix with the undead and the undead plan to feed on the living. As techno-pop music blasts from the speakers and the cool undead rock, blood suddenly flows from the sprinkler system and vampires violently turn upon their human partners. Blade, a leather-clothed, sword-slashing, Ninja-like avenger who has been watching and waiting, enthusiastically dispatches a series of angry vampires and saves the life of the innocent human who has been lured into the club. This scene establishes the film's basic context: evil vampires hunt humans to a rock-and-roll background against a visually graphic background while an angry and powerful Blade attempts to protect the humans and hunt the vampires.

The second illustrative scene is equally energized. Blade invades the headquarters of Deacon Frost's vampires, and while a bank of computers is attempting to translate the mysterious language of the sacred Book of the Vampires, a homage to the first and perhaps greatest vampire film, Murnau's *Nosferatu*, in order to discover the proper rite with which to resurrect the ancient vampire god, he is attacked by a host of waiting vampires. Blade dispatches all but one of his attackers, and in a visually stunning dramatically directed chase sequence Norrington uses a speeding subway as a blocking device, a means of escape, and finally a method of execution. This inspired two minutes is a breathtaking dramatic sequence and captures the visual audacity that is central to an adapted comic-book narrative.

The final defining scene takes place in the Temple of Eternal Night. Deacon Frost sacrifices the elder vampires, throws Dr Jensen to a hungry, slobbering zombie, announces that he himself is Blade's father, offers Blade his own mother as a sex slave, and then begins to drain Blade of his blood as the ultimate sacrifice to Lamagra, the vampire god, who, the computer translation indicated, will return to earth and lead the vampire takeover once Blade, the foretold halfbreed, has been sacrificed. By this point, all pretense of plot has been discarded, but the spectacular set, straight out of a video game, and the extended duel between Blade and Frost almost make up in visual imagery what the scene lacks in logic or coherence. The mythological references suggested throughout this scene appear to come from a Cliff's Notes version of Joseph Campbell's *Mythology* adapted by the scriptwriters of *Zena, The Warrior Princess*. They make little sense, but they certainly are fun, and fun is what comic-book heroes are all about, both on the screen and in the pages of the pulps. This sequence, more than any other in the film, captures the pure energy, pure lunacy, and pure fun of the comic-book genre.

In examining Norrington's film and the transformation of the figure of the vampire from monster to superhero it is essential to look at the film's source, the Marvel Comic series featuring Blade. For those who have not entered the comic book universe since the days of *Superman* and *The Green Lantern*, comic books now cost $2.95, not $.25, and the contemporary narratives are darker and far more graphic than most earlier narratives (although the famous *Tales From the Crypt* series of the 1950s defined dark and graphic so effectively that parents and some school boards urged that comic books be banned as a threat to truth, Justice, and the American way). In July 1994 the Marvel Comics Group began a series called *Blade: The Vampire Hunter*, which ran through ten episodes before being cancelled mid series because, in the editor's words, "*Blade* has become a casualty to brutal economic realities" (*Blade* 1:10,30). Perhaps the lesson intended by the creative forces behind the series is that only an accountant can kill a vampire.

The character of Blade the Vampire Hunter had appeared in previous Marvel narratives, beginning as a secondary character in 1973 in Marvel Comics *Tomb of Dracula*, a popular series that began with Dracula as a villain but ended with the vampire as a sympathetic character. By contrast, the 1994-1995 series attempted to revive Blade as a major figure. The cover of *Blade #*1 captures the basic narrative situation of the series. Blade, the heroic Black half-vampire armed with two swords stands in front of a menacing black shadow with red eyes, grasping hands, and a large ring showing the letter "D." The figure is identified as Dracula, although it resembles J R R Tolkien's Dark Lord more then Bram Stoker's Transylvanian Count. Nevertheless Blade, the ultimate vampire hunter, is set in opposition to Dracula, the ultimate vampire. This conflict is made even clearer on the cover of *Blade #2*, where Dracula, dressed in black spandex and red cape with wolf-head belt buckle and skull-and-wing cape clasp (an appropriate supervillain outfit) grapples with Blade. Blade the superhero manages to defeat Dracula the supervillain in an appropriately pulp fashion and, in the following issues in the series confronts a variety of evil figures including Marie Laveau, The Voodoo Queen of New Orleans, and Deacon Frost, the villain from the film who is transformed into a deity of the undead who, complete with horns and tail, looks a great deal like some of the traditional images of Satan.

Marvel Comics' selection of villains for the *Blade* series is quite interesting and reflects some of the fault lines in contemporary American culture in the way that the popular culture often does quite well. Just as the mutant monster theme of the films and comic books of the 1950s reflected cultural concerns about nuclear disaster, issues of race and gender are foregrounded in the casting of characters in the Blade narratives. The confrontation between Blade and Marie Laveau, who was not a vampire as far as anyone knows but an actual African-American woman who lived in New Orleans practising traditional Creole cures and curses who became, in local folklore, a voodoo priestess, allows the writers to dramatize the tensions that exist between men and women in the culture as the two characters struggle to dominate each other and take control over the powers of the night. Equally significant is the depiction of Deacon Frost, who (in *Blade #7*) is drawn as a nineteenth century Southern Baptist church deacon and is, of course, white as well as vampiric. As in the film, in the comic text Frost is revealed as the vampire who attacked Blade's mother and who is willing to sell his own soul to the forces of darkness to bring about the destruction of humanity. The implications in this confrontation are quite clear. The defender of humanity is an urban African-American whose mother was destroyed by a white Southern "Deacon" who has sold his soul to the devil in order to achieve dominance over all human life. The Anglo-Christian patriarchy is in league with death, and the representative of cultural diversity, an African-American/vampire-human, is humanity's defender. It is clear that issues of race as well as gender, along with a postmodern urban setting, provide the creators of the *Blade* series with a context to add depth to the adventures of their hero.

Issues of race and gender are not what drive narratives in the Marvel Comics universe, however, and after taking two issues to destroy Deacon Frost and the god of the undead, Blade is once again confronted by Dracula; for as we know from a variety of sources, including the Hammer resurrections starring Christopher Lee, you can't keep the good Count down. The cover of the final issue of the series (*Blade #10*) shows a fierce dark Dracula with red eyes and flowing hair with the words "Dracula wins. Everybody Dies. The End." It is my favorite cover of the entire series. The narrative between the covers has little to do with Dracula, however. Instead, Blade confronts a character named Postmortem who had a chainsaw in place of one hand and an oversized, surrealistic version of a Swiss army knife in place of the other and who has been sent by Dracula, "The Lord of the Damned," to destroy Blade. Blade, of course destroys, Postmortem, whose surgically implanted weapons are no real threat to a hero who combines human feeling and vampiric courage, but Blade does not survive to fight in another issue because Marvel pulled the plug, or perhaps I could say put a stake in the heart of the series. And, as the title asserts, "Dracula Wins."

Of course Dracula wins. Despite the best efforts of *Blade'*s creators -- Ian Edginton, Terry Kavanagh, and Chris Cooper -- Blade, though half-vampire, was essentially another comic-book superhero, similar to Batman or Superman. Dracula, as we know, remains Dracula, a central figure in the cultural imagination who can never die. The creators of the *Blade* series attempted to turn him into a pulp villain (I keep seeing

Dracula in tights and I shudder), but Dracula will not be confined. The creative people at Marvel Comic discovered this, as did the creative people at Hammer Films decades earlier.

Just as the producers at Hammer Films would not let Dracula remain in his coffin as long as there was an audience for him, the executives at New Line Cinema and Marvel Comics realized that Blade's appearance on screen had created a new and larger audience for the vampire hunter. As a result, Marvel Comics has planned a *Blade Bookshelf Edition*, a four-episode miniseries with an original story, and an ongoing *Blade* title. In addition, Marvel created a new cybercomic (see www.marvel.com/blade). Not to be left behind, New Line Cinema is planning to release a second *Blade* film starring Wesley Snipes in 2001. Blade, following in the footsteps of his archrival, Dracula, will not stay dead.

Despite what my grandmother used to tell me when she found me reading a comic book, one can find something of value in the "funny papers," and an examination of the Marvel *Blade: The Vampire Hunter* series and the New Line Cinema adaptation reveals several significant trends in the depiction of vampires in the popular culture at the end of the twentieth century. First, vampires continue to be popular and they continue to shift shapes. In the Marvel series vampires can be heroes, villains, part-human, part-god; they can operate computers or run nightclubs, and they often do not like each other. They are, in fact, a dark reflection of human society. Second, and perhaps more importantly, good, old fashioned, blood-sucking monster vampires can attract large audiences, and those audiences can be found watching movies and reading comic books. The elemental vampire, a bloodsucking horror, is still popular. Third, and I think this may be the most significant observation, at a time when the most successful and creative writers of vampire fiction, writers such as Chelsea Quinn Yarbro and Anne Rice, are developing complex and sympathetic vampires against backgrounds firmly embedded in the world of historical romance, the vampire narrative of violence and revulsion, always part of the genre, has found a home in the movies and the comics.

The popularity of *Blade* and the willingness of both Marvel Comics and New Line Cinema to invest in new narrative forms for the vampire hunter is an indication of the attractiveness of their creation. In some ways the *Blade* narratives are throwbacks to the traditional vampire narratives of mid-century; they feature vampires who are pure evil, creatures who in their thirst for blood and domination are embodiments of absolute self-gratification. Confronting this vampiric evil, however, is not the learned Professor Van Helsing and his band of fearless vampire hunters representing the best of Western civilization. Instead, the violence of evil is confronted by the violence of a lone outcast, suggesting that vigilante violence rather than learning and cooperation is the antidote to evil. In this film it appears that all of the traditional underpinnings of the modern industrial nation state – religion, education, business, culture, and art – have failed or been corrupted, and lone wolves on motorcycles are the only source of hope. Given the anti-government attitudes surging through the culture, this film is a telling commentary on our time, and perhaps one that only an artifact of the popular culture can make with impunity. Unfortunately, no one takes movies or comic books seriously.

As mentioned above, this depiction of the vampire in *Blade* is different from that of the popular postmodern vampire of Yarbro and Rice, an intelligent self-aware character whose vampirism is a personal tragedy rather than a curse that threatens the human community. The vampires in *Blade* haunt and hunt in an urban world full of violence and devoid of the comforts of faith, science, and community that Van Helsing called upon in *Dracula* to protect Western culture from the ravages of the undead. They also hunt in the world of pulp comics and the movies, a universe far away from the novels inhabited by their more civilized cousins, and a universe still ignored and neglected by most critics and academics.

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