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Faces of the Vampire in Comic Books

ABSTRACT
This article deals with the issue of vampire imagery in comic-books. Considering the art of the comics as an essential part of popular culture production, I set out to trace the translation process of the image of the vampire from the folkish background to the high-literature and art, and from there to the everyday entertainment industry of the twentieth century. Although the comics are a distinct art field, having their own idioms, techniques and issues, they have never been separated from their cultural, social, economic and political milieu, taking their themes, concepts and settings from the larger cultural space they were part of. Present in comics-books, the vampire was at first a major character in folktales and high literature. The vampire made a great career in comics too, and in some aspects it became even more visible throughgraphic stories, influencing its representations in other media channels such as movies, animated series or computer games. In the following, I shall try to identify the main hypostases of the vampire in comic-books, arguing for the importance of the comic-books to the whole cultural context of the Western world and indeed for the whole of mankind.

KEYWORDS
Comic-books; Vampire; Popular Culture; Myth; Folklore; Enterntainment.

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Introduction

To speak about the vampire is never dull, never boring, never useless, but on the other hand, always hard to do in a rigorous way, in a "scientific" discourse which holds back the temptation to follow one's own fascination with the subject, one's own fears and, why not, desires. We all "know" about vampires, we have all heard of them and got invaded by images, rumours and stories about such lethal predators, and some of us might even claim that we have personally encountered at least one or two.

The purpose of a scholarly endeavour would not be to state whether vampires really exist or not. Too many methodological and conceptual knots would appear: what kind of vampires, when and where, and above all, in what kind of "reality"? Our rationalist, scientific and technological paradigm forbids us to accept unverified hypotheses. We know that a corpse cannot walk by itself. But what if that belief is so strong for a certain community or culture that it practically shapes it and establishes its rhythm and content? Aren't the care for the dead and the questions regarding a presupposed "afterlife" considered to be the source of religious thinking and following that, of culture? Why should one be aware of other

continents, other galaxies or black holes more than of one's dead relatives and friends? Why should one be more open to life on other planets than to "another kind of life" for those one holds dear? Rigorously thinking (judging by the available verifying data), life on other planets would not expose a bigger dose of absurdity than the possibility of a dead man walking again (and eating!) – it just has more supporters.

Furthermore, in a study of vampires one should clearly state one's aims, tools and field of action. The term "vampire" has invaded too many literary, artistic, social and scientific areas not to generate major confusions. If vampires are just the blood drinkers, we can find various forms of haemophilia in medical and forensic studies, or dangerous murderers who drank their victims blood, but we can easily see why those cases do not qualify as "vampirism" in the sense we are interested in, although they might be referred to as such, in a metaphorical way. If we are looking for buried but not rotten corpses, or corpses excavated and found in strange postures, we may search for biological explanations, such as clinical death, or certain bacteria and climatic conditions, and still find no "real" vampires. Crypto-zoology exposes many kinds of blood-sucking creatures, mostly bats, which are also known as "vampires", but again as a result of a taxonomic "contamination" from other disciplines. We could adopt an ethnographic or anthropological pursuit, trying to identify stories, actions and rituals involving beliefs in vampires, to gather descriptive data and contextualize it, searching for the reasons things are (or not) what they seem to be. Mythological and religious studies would help us identify certain recurrent themes and mental settings dealing with the vampires and the afterlife, helping us trace the "bigger picture" of a certain society's mental ambient and follow the avatars of well-known and influential vampiric gods, spirits, heroes, and so on. Parapsychology (whether it may be accepted or not as a valid field of science) talks about "energetic vampires" which are not at all undead creatures, but persons who drain the "life energy" from others, making them feel uncomfortable. Of course, vampires may be sought in literature, film, comic-books, computer games and other forms of "high" and "popular" culture, using the methodology and the concepts available in the disciplines dealing with them. It is true that all these kinds of insights could be interesting and useful, and multidisciplinary strategy is a necessity nowadays, but one has to restrain one's field of action to a manageable ground, otherwise risking diluting the argumentation in a disciplinary and methodological vortex that could simply not help anyone.

In this article I intend to focus on the presence of the vampire figure in comic-books, the so-called "ninth art", a cultural product rather ignored by scholars but tremendously influential and productive during the last century in the western world, especially in the USA. Starting with a cultural contextualization, needed for the background of the present account, in which some quick anthropological, historical and linguistic observations are made, I shall try to expose the presence of vampire characters and stories in comic books, as a manifestation of popular culture throughout the twentieth century. Of course, beyond the necessary specific issues relevant to comics, all discussions have to relate to the background of general cultural, social, historical and economic aspects. So if the vampire appears in a particular way in comics and some traits are defining for this medium, it is of no lesser importance that the vampire has, at the same time, penetrated many other forms of artistic expression and entertainment. I argue for the relevance of comics to (mostly) western contemporary culture, as well as for the continuing strong relations this medium establishes with other

forms of art and with the general public's artistic and thematic preferences and state of mind. I shall also try to present some aspects of vampires in comics, a short typology with no exhaustive pretensions – because the material produced by this young form of art is tremendously vast.

A cultural phenomenon

The vampire is certainly one of the anthropological constants of human existence, a well-known and widespread image that dominates a large area of humanity's psychological realm. Practically, it may be considered that there is not a single person in the world who does not have an image or an idea about such a being, depending, of course, on the cultural and sociological background he/ she has inherited and projected his/her personal phantasms upon. "Throughout history, every culture of man has had an incarnation of the vampire, a being responsible for causing plagues and death", Theresa Bane asserts [1], arguing that all the communities around the globe she has studied have exposed beliefs in such entities which possessed unnatural abilities. From the African tribes and the Australian Aboriginals to the European rural folk and the Native American cultures, the vampire has proved to be an inalienable psychological and cultural presence, varying in form, manifestation or habits, but causing similar effects and being caused by relatively similar reasons.[2]

In fact, some of the most ancient samples of writing, dating from around 4 000 B.C., dealt with vampiric spirits, such being the case of the written spell of a mother for protecting her child against Ekimmou, a dangerous entity also present in the correspondence between Dusratta, the Assyrian monarch, and Amenophis III of Egypt, dating from around 1 500 B.C.[3] Judging by the fear this Ekimmou generated at the highest levels in Middle-Eastern ancient communities, affecting even political discourses and endeavours, we may consider him the first genuine "Prince of Darkness", long before the exploding career of modern-day Dracula.

In fact, the prehistory of the vampire is as old as the history of humanity itself, such imaginary beings populating the mental maps of all the civilizations that managed to transmit their myths and stories over the ages, forms like the Mesopotamian Akakarm, the Greek daughters of Hecate, the Roman lemurs, or the Celtic or Germanic vampire demons[4] having become part of the present-day popular culture, images recognized by the public due to their presence in literature, movies, comic-books and, last but not least, computer games.

Regardless of the anthropological, cultural or linguistic aspects that interest the specialist, involving the above-mentioned differrences between various types and aspects of the vampire, this entity is mostly perceived today as the "dead man who – because of certain punishments or curses – leaves its grave during nighttimes and wanders among asleep humans to feed upon their lively blood – its only source of nourishment".[5] The term "vampire" appeared only in the eighteenth century, referring specifically to this dead person coming back to life and haunting the living (and denoting a vision of the body as an autonomous machine, with enough life remaining in it to avoid rotting, and which returns to take others to the grave with it).[6] It is not surprising that it was often assimilated with other types of revenants[7] – ghosts, poltergeists, zombies or werewolves, the strict differrentiations in this bestiary of the undead being the result of later classifications and speculations in the occult area, becoming, during the twentieth century, common places in popular western (and not only) culture (today we all know that the vampires and the werewolves are supposed to be "natural" enemies).

The concept of the "living corpse" was invented by the German anthropologist H. Naumann in 1921, as a key to explaining the first stage of human thinking about the dead (all set in an evolutionist perspective, in which two more stages were to be identified, that of the double body and finally, that of the duality body-soul, imposed by the Old Testament and still functional today).[8] The term "vampire" finds its origin in the ancient Slavic languages, in *opâr* or *opir*, the first deriving from a term meaning "bat" and the other from "flying, floating in the air like smoke".[9] This offers a valid explanation to the ability of the vampire to take the form of a bat, of a fly, a bird or any other flying creature; when this metamorphosis generates the body of a wolf, the result is named *vurkolak* in Slavic languages and *pricolici* in Greek and Romanian; the Latin root *Strix*, *striga*, has evolved into *strigoi* in Romanian and *strega* (witch) in Italian; the French language refers to these nightmarish creatures as *cauchemares*, the equivalent of *Mahr* in German, *mora* in Serbian, Bulgarian, Russian and Croat, and *moroi* in Romanian; finally, the vampire is also known as "nosferatu", a rare particle without a clear origin, identified by Matei Cazacu in the Romanian "nefârtatu", another reference to the Devil himself.[10]

All this information helps at drawing a conceptual area in which the image of the vampire resides and from which it borrows its semantic and symbolic load, covering a vast field in the nocturnal domain, dominated by uncertainty, fear and evil. Theresa Bane identifies the impassable difficulty of giving a single valid definition to the vampire because, as she states, all different species of vampires, from all around the world, have basic human fear in common and each human culture, from various periods and locations, has feared different things.[11] "No matter when or where, how it hunts or what it hunts, the vampire attacks that which man considers most precious."[12] The vampire has always appeared as the reification of the most terrifying aspects of a particular community's biological, social and cultural existence, from the destruction of the resources (cattle, hunting prey, crops) or the theft of physiological sustenance elements (blood, body heat, fat, various illnesses), to the social anxieties (the stranger, the neighbour, the leaders, the warmongers) and religious and metaphysical uncertainties (the walking corpse, the restless soul, the demonic figure).

It is also important to keep in mind that the vampire is one of the most versatile concepts, being able to melt in any (until now) cultural contexts and keep up with the changes and tensions in the field of the social imagination, "outliving" many other symbolic constructs, such as the unicorn or the griffon, becoming "the single most adaptable monster that mankind has ever dreamt of"[13], a "Darwinian delight".[14]

The vampire in comics

Although some specialists consider the sequential art of comics to have its origins in older (and even ancient) artistic manifestations, like the paintings of William Hogarth from the eighteenth century, *The Tortures of Saint Erasmus* from the fifteenth century, the Bayeux tapestry, emperor Trajan's Column, Egyptian hieroglyphs or even the prehistoric paintings from Altamira or Lascaux caves[15], most of them accepted that the comic-books are an art form that had appeared by the end of the nineteenth century in the USA and reached its peak of production by the half of the twentieth century.[16] Making their appearance relatively at the same time with two other forms of art, like photography and film, comics took their own developing path, created their own language and techniques, formed their own public and content, and even proved to be a

huge business (the Japanese comics, mostly known as *manga*, containing many sub-genres, are at the moment the biggest market for such products worldwide, with a profit of 4.7 billion dollars per year[17]).

On the other hand, comics have never evolved separately from the social, cultural, economic and even political contexts, always reflecting a preference of the public (in subjects, themes, messages and techniques), being a privileged medium from which one could enlarge one's knowledge and understanding of a specific society. Bradford Wright even states that by ignoring the analysis of comics as a product of popular culture which by its content became a constitutive aspect of western (and today we may say global) world, we are prohibited from covering all the complexities the studies of culture require and hence risk reaching wrong conclusions. For the USA the comics have been so important and influential, the same author concludes, that he does not find it exaggerated to refer to it as the "comic-book nation".[18]

At first, while they were still a new form of expression, comics were searching for suitable topics, narrative and graphic styles, technological solutions and means of distribution, and they were thematically stuck in domestic, "non-problematic", usual everyday petty events and mild humour (the cause of the term "comics"). As soon as the public's interest and appetite for the new medium rose to high levels, the industrious publishers and artists broadened the thematic horizon and comics begun telling adventure, murder, science-fiction and even horror stories. Many experts identify the source of the comics' tales in the cheap pulp literature which was very popular during the American Civil War and in the first decades of the twentieth century.[19] During that period, along with the respected mainstream literary oeuvres, the market got overloaded with such short and cheap stories, written without talent or intellectual care (there were also exceptions, a few pulp authors managing to reach mainstream level, like Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ray Bradbury or Raymond Chandler). Characters like *The Shadow*, *Captain Satan*, or titles like *Amazing Stories*, *Startling Tales*, *Volunteer Corpse Brigade, Cult of the Living Carcass* or *New Girls for Satan's Blood Ballet* were trying to get the attention of the young and unpretentious public.[20]

Searching for the sensational, the shocking, but at the same time for the easy to find, it is no surprising that the pulp and, later, the comics authors looked for inspiration in the most popular and successful plots. Since its publication in 1897, the *Dracula* novel written by the Irish Bram Stoker has become a necessary reference, a masterpiece that gave birth to more than 600 interpretations in books, film, comics, animated cartoons or board and computer games.[21]

Although the novel *Dracula* gave birth to the prototype of the modern vampire, the aristocratic, educated and gothic figure, as opposed to the folkloric image of the vampire which had been haunting the rural Europe for centuries, Stoker's interest in and fascination with the living dead was neither new nor singular. He just gave the most successful form to a flux of common fears, desires and curiosities in the context of an ascending trend of occultism (by the end of the nineteenth century, the "secret" societies dealing with the occult, the exotic and the unnatural had reached astonishing numbers all over Europe and America). Sonia Faessel[22] explains this awe with the "unorthodox" through the background of repressed phantasms of the English society (polygamy, rape, necrophilia, bisexuality) and the romantic reaction towards strictly scientific rationalism, more and more perceived as a source of alienation, solitude and anxiety, forcing the "misfits" to seek

refuge in all kinds of escapist strategies, from extreme forms of art to the use of magic and drugs.

The "educated" vampire is present throughout the whole nineteenth century, in all romantic literature and poetry, mostly in feminine forms, as a synthesis of the exotic (the vampire being the stranger, the alien by nature) and the erotic: "a sexual fantasy caused by the transgression of prohibitions and a mystic impulse by symbolizing the will to project oneself outside the world and get unified with a creature of a different essence".[23] The first major "cult" male vampire was Ruthven, created by Lord Byron, but finished by John William Polidori, his secretary.[24] This type of vampire featuring in romantic literature was not the dark figure of folklore, but rather a fallen angel, a victim of his own aristocratic condition, a great fallen being, never understood, never loved, the always lonely corruptor of women (it was considered a portrait of Byron himself, whom Polidori is said to have hated and despised)[25]; a perfect character to match the Romantic sense of nostalgia, sorrow and meditation.

Although the vampire was a theme exploited by many other great poets and novelists (Hoffman, Baudelaire, Dumas, Tolstoy), Bram Stoker was the one that imposed its figure and its typology: the vampire as pure evil residing within the human condition, the dark impulses that have to be fought against with all cultural and scientific resources, but also the sum of its habits, preferences and the means of protection humanity deploys against it (crosses, garlic, ash stakes). In fact, not even this view was totally new, since direct sources of inspiration are to be found in William Wikinson, Emily Gerard, Ármin Vámbéry, Polidori, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and mostly Marie Nizet, who wrote in 1879 the novel *Le Capitaine Vampire (nouvelle roumane),* and her brother, Henri Nizet.[26]

A popular figure, the vampire (or, more specifically, Dracula, who became a synonym for the vampire, almost a common noun) gained even more influence at the beginning of the twentieth century, and a true epos took shape. Beyond the many novels, films, plays or comics in which he kept the main role, Dracula was placed in absurd scenarios, in which he confronted *Hercules* (1961), *Maciste* (1962), *Billy the Kid* (1966) or *Abbott and Costello* (1948).[27] He became the subject of irony, spoofs, jokes, a mark on other products (form pillows to jellybeans), and a Halloween VIP. This "familiarization" with the vampire imposes him as a main figure in the Western (and we may say now global) conscience, but has also taken away the aura of mystery and fascination. Today, the vampire does not scare anyone anymore; it is just a brand, a metaphor or a costume from Hollywood. The fascination with the vampire has lost much of its strength, although there were some moments of sudden boosts in this type of character, caused by occasional novels or artworks: the novels of Anne Rice, especially *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), which became a cult movie in the '90s, supported by the most desired males in the film industry, adulated worldwide (Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt and Christian Slater), or the recent *Twilight* saga written by Stephenie Meyer, presenting friendly and beautiful vampires, capable of deep true feelings, beasts with a humane core, set in a new romantic interpretation (this project has already begun to be transposed into graphic novels).

As stated above, comic-books, as a major medium of popular culture, have taken successful themes and adapted them to their own language, aesthetic and narrative criteria. Tales about vampires have flooded their pages, which were intended to scare, provoke horror or curiosity. Of course, initially, the character kept close to the original

Dracula ethos and the vampire was, without exception, the personification of natural-born evil, the destructive malevolent force which needed to be destroyed for the sake of the human kind. All heroes and super-heroes, who are among the most notorious fictional characters ever created[28], had to fight at least once in their career against a seemingly indestructible vampire. Ugly or beautiful, possessing tremendous brute force or using devious schemes, an idiot or a scientist, the vampire has provided good reasons for writers and graphic artists to issue countless (and unfortunately, mostly mediocre) comic-book stories. His image has become so used, the clichés so obvious and dull, that the vampire has lost his altitude and turned into a charade of his own self.[29] The idea of evil itself became somewhat outdated, mostly after the "real" horrors of Nazism and Bolshevism[30] (what kind of vampire could have competed against the professional and efficient industries of death?).

An interesting approached is offered by stories in which the vampire gets more complex, his inner motives are more or less investigated and he becomes more than just the heartless predator of the night. To better illustrate some of the major images of the vampire in comic books, I shall try next to stress on the most visited types.

1. Dracula

Of course, Dracula is the most well-known vampire figure and today it is obvious he has surpassed all other prototypes, whether they issued out of popular or high culture. The many beliefs and rituals involving vampires around Europe and the globe are left aside, or sometimes inserted into stories that have the same "King of the Undead" as a main actor.

In 1972, after obtaining copyrights, *Marvel Comics*, the property of Stan Lee and one of the two major comics publishing houses in the United States, started a series dedicated to this controversial character, called *Tomb of Dracula* (70 numbers appeared until 1979, not counting episodic appearances and other short-limited series and supplements). The series was intended to be a follow-up to Stoker's novel, bringing count Dracula into present times and trying to recover the mysterious atmosphere that made the novel so popular. In the beginning, three skilled writers tried their abilities in bringing Dracula back to life and to public attention: Gerry Conway, Archie Goodwyn and Garnder Fox, each conceiving two numbers drawn by the same great artist, Eugen Colan. But the best formula was initiated in the seventh issue, when Colan started turning into visual form the scripts of one of the geniuses of writing in the comics Industry, Marv Wolfman.

From this point on, given the relaxation of the *Comics Code Authority*, which had imposed a burdening censorship on comics during the first two decades after the Second World War, the comics series *Tomb of Dracula* became the leading one-protagonist horror series in the field. However, the series was much more than a cheap horror easy-made narrative. As Sonia Faessel observes, the '70s brought a "rehabilitation" of the vampire, entering the dramas of marginality, of seclusion and damnation, but still

holding on to a sense of humanity that the modern world seemed to have lost (eternal love, honor, pride in suffering, wisdom of the ages).[31] Many times the vampire, the pawn of the Devil, evil incarnate, has to face and defeat even more evil humans, so that the innocent or principles should keep on living. Under the pencil of Marv Wolfman, Dracula became the perfect occasion for a meditation on the human condition, on existentialist modern issues, on human relationships, on cultural heritage and the future. Many critics have noticed the absence of Dracula's point of view in Stoker's novel, but *Tomb of Dracula* offers just that: the voice (and more important, the inner thoughts) of the nightly fiend, a voice that could always seem familiar to each of us, because it expresses human doubts.

Always torn between opposite tendencies, Dracula is the effigy of modern man and his/ her drama. Calling himself "Lord of the undead" and aiming at bringing the rule of the vampires over the Earth at his own discretionary command, he also is bound to keep close links with his natal Transylvanian ground, otherwise facing the peril of final death (though his exploits take place mainly in London and around it, he has to periodically return to his castle by flying in the shape of a bat). This is a major issue for the American public, the vast majority experiencing the same anxiety, a phenomenon which Danny Fingeroth considers to be defining for the whole American identity, stating that no other society has developed such a strong sense of transition from one community to another.[32]

Under his brutal cynicism, Dracula is someone who can be reasoned with. There are some moments when he opts for sparing or even saving the lives of certain humans he considers worthy, men and women who prove to be able to feel ageless love or bold honor, feelings that he ultimately craves for and constitute his deepest motivations (for example, Dracula openly sympathizes with a young villager who feels that the old traditional world has nothing more to offer him and plans to leave for the city, the new progressive world, and finally saves him from the fangs of other vampires[33]). The fury that urges Dracula to hate the world and to feel the need to subdue it comes from the hopelessness before the death of the one he loved while still a human being, love and hate that he took with him beyond his own death. Delving into this romantic theme, the authors knew how to avoid the sentimentalist trap, keeping the series away from a sort of graphic soap opera: Dracula kills. He still searches for fresh womanly blood, he still commands rats, bats or wolves, but all he does is dubbed by his own comments upon his actions. The laments, the desperation, the cynicism and the anger are there to simultaneously express the excruciating pain and the irresistible desire of being alive. This all-too-human profile of the king of the undead is underlined by the end of the series, when Satan deprives him of his vampiresque powers and leaves him "just" a human being, susceptible of being hurt, of feeling fear, cold or fatigue (and instead of stealing blood, he ends up stealing money, like a petty mugger[34]). He even uses a cross (burning his hands) against hordes of hostile vampires to save himself and a bunch of naïve but pure-hearted children.[35] The complete humanization of Dracula is accomplished within his instance as a father mourning the loss of his own son, the golden angel Ianus (whose resurrection he still finds the lucidity to oppose[36]), at the same time fighting his daughter, Lilith, a vampire who experiences absolutely no human feelings.

The mythological content transpires from all the issues in the series, the places, the characters, the events and the concepts reminding of and sending to classic texts,

from folktales to biblical quotations, Homeric poems, Shakespearean settings or Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Wolfman himself admitted that this poem was the most influential reading of his youth[37]). The series, being one of the most appreciated ever made in American comics, determined the editors from Marvel to get the advantage of that and propelled Dracula among the most visible characters in the Marvel universe, also perceived as a segment of modern mythology. So Dracula fights or teams up with other leading Marvel characters, such as the Silver Surfer, Dr. Strange or Apocalypse, or makes guest appearances in many issues outside his own, helping weaker titles to increase sales. It is no exaggeration to say that if the beginning the series tried to take advantage of the strong Dracula epos it shortly began contributing and giving important boosts to the latter, becoming the main reference to Dracula during its publication period.

At the narrative level, *Tomb of Dracula* also operates with modern and postmodern techniques, such as auto-references or intertextuality, remarks about Stoker's book, about the well-known Dracula movies or about real settings, events or characters, sometimes making even Dracula aware that he is just a cartoon character. His troubles, thoughts, fears and hopes transcend paper and turn into philosophical inner debates that appeal to a mature and educated audience, able to play this game of multiple intertwined perspectives. Dracula is the mythical monster inherited from past interpretations, the modern man with his/ her struggles, difficulties and disillusions, an abstract entity pronouncing verdicts on the human condition, and the reader himself/herself, all at the same time. All this becomes completely clear if we turn our attention away from the graphic story and look into the "forum" pages, a tradition institutionalized in American comics, where editors answer letters they receive from the public and debate topics related to the series *per se* or to the general interest (given the fact that American comics appear on a regular basis, each story needing more limited page issues, and practically involving the public into the development of the main story in a common endeavor). Almost in each issue, there are messages which raise difficult questions, addressing not only the editors but virtually all the American public, and given the profile of the Dracula epos, most of those dilemmas regard religious beliefs, hypotheses and comments. Thus, *Tomb of Dracula* became a forum where existentialist and identity issues were discussed and negotiated in a public sphere, not limited to the elitist and exclusivist framework of academic courses or religious groups.

The series ended in 1979 with the final death of Dracula, but the name and the character still appeared in other works, continuing to be a compulsory reference on the "vampiric" scene. The same glorious duo Wolfman-Colan conceived a comeback in the short-lived series *The Curse of Dracula*, for the Dark Horse publishing house (specialized in horror comics), proving once more that Dracula is more than a simple character: it is a symbol that contemporary imagination simply cannot afford to give up.

2. Vampire Clans

The need to perpetuate the public's appeal to the vampire characters and stories required some narrative strategies that enlarged the original Dracula setting, reaching hypotheses and intrigues that made the vampiric imaginary space a mythology in its own rights. History, geography, anthropology, all provided information on which the authors started inventing characters and events, more or less fascinating, more or less inspired, but which contributed to the epos. The writers and the artists began borrowing ideas from one another and collaborating for bigger and better scenarios. New types of vampires, new artifacts, new powers, new profiles, and many other narrative artifices made the vampire stories never lose a dedicated public and appeal to more consumers.

As regards the theme of this article, I would only stress upon the idea of vampire clans, families, tribes or associations, a trick that gave an important boost to the industry (be it film, books, comics or games), enlarging the "vampire" concept – today it is not sufficient to just talk about a vampire, but about a specific type of vampire. The authors gathered more and more information from ethnographic and anthropological studies. Dracula is no longer the only vampire, not even the prototype, but the most prominent figure in an ever-growing pool of European, American, Arabian, far-Eastern or African vampires, with their own background, psychic profiles, abilities and weak points. The Nosferats (they obviously inherited their physical and mental appearance form the Murnau movie) are accepted by all authors and are easily recognized by any public, being an evergreen homage to Max Schreck, the first major "visual" vampire in popular culture (the dramatization after his own novel that Stoker attempted did not have any success). But there are also other vampire families, like the Bruja, the Cappadocians, the Malkavians (a narrative space that offers the best example for such a "vampiric" society is *Vampire the Masquerade,* a universe created by Mark Hagen, which got its expression in role-playing games, where the player can even be part of the story and become the vampire for a while, interacting with the others in an interesting setting).

This diversification of the vampire character has been an excellent strategy, because this way a larger public could be satisfied, from those who search for strong sensations and chills, to the ones searching for romantic and meditative profiles or to the ones looking for fearless and honorable combatants and action-driven stories (the vampire element has penetrated other genres, like heroic-fantasy, science-fiction or western)[38].

3. The Virtuous Vampire

Of course, the vampire is perceived by the majority as a fearsome concept, but there are also fans that prefer the romantic approach, the Byronic image of the vampire as more of a victim of destiny than a ruthless predator. After the image of the vampire as a terror-generating narrative item got dull due to overuse, the exploration of other kinds of resources has proved to be the winning strategy. The public would not accept today a simplistic vision of the vampire, be it good or bad. A two-dimensional shallow figure would not possess the potential to attract interest or fascinate. The more complex the vampires have become, the more the noble types that have had to emerge and expose a different set of values, motives, actions and abilities. Refusing to feed on humans (or at least refusing to kill them), or helping them with knowledge, skills or power, falling in love with other vampires or even humans,

hiding, hating itself, searching for cure or even sacrificing itself for the sake of a greater principle, sometimes make the vampire a tragic romantic figure, a symbol of individual destiny, of Promethean descent.

Perfect examples are to be found, for example, in Anne Rice's gothic books, or in those of Stephenie Meyer, which generated waves of euphoria close to fanaticism among the readers. Anyway, a pure-hearted vampire would be as shallow as a purely evil one, so the virtuous vampire by himself is not enough to grant a successful story; therefore, he seldom is present alone, most of the times getting involved in a bigger framework within the complexities of human and vampire societies. He needs the opposing mirror of evil, be it vampiric or not.

4. The Erotic Vampire

Maybe the closest to the Byronic heritage is the image of the vampire as an irresistible sexual predator, a strong and efficient metaphor. In comics (as in the majority of popular culture products), this kind of vampire is mostly depicted as a female entity. The main topic in such stories would not be death (or at least not only death), but lust. Clearly addressing a masculine young audience, these comic books try to exploit the hidden and most pungent erotic reveries of the adolescent, depicting wonderful seductresses, dressed in an utterly provoking manner (to say the least). Benefiting from the visual graphic support, these sexual fantasies of the contemporary male are maybe the most explicit depictions of succubae ever laid on paper.

The most prolific scene in which such vampires activate is the Japanese scene, in *hentai* products (the sexually explicit *manga*). The vampire, also being a pretext for challenging sexual and cultural taboos and stereotypes, finds a perfect medium in the Japanese *hentai* scene, known for depicting and celebrating shocking topics, at least for the western public (necrophilia, sado-masochism, pedophilia, zoophilia, scatophilia, incest, rape and all the sexually offensive issues for a traditional society). I even take the responsibility to state that comics are the medium that serves best these intentions, since their graphic support offers explicitly arousing material, which could hardly be accomplished in films (the advantage comics still hold on movies is the possibility of exploiting any theme at the smallest expenses, although they suffer greatly from the impossibility of movement).

Of course, such products are bound to conflict with strong prejudices and we have to admit that the majority are simply ludicrous self-sufficient cheap stories, but they do exist and benefit from a big fandom (and, hence, big revenues). Occasionally, good stories supported by exceptional artwork give birth to some accounts that seem to continue the work of the Marquis de Sade.

5. The Subliminal Vampire

The vampire is not always explicitly present in all stories that contain elements borrowed from the vampiric narrative arsenal. Although they are not referred to as vampires, some characters have the ability to change shape, to fly (with wings, sometimes retractable), or to use signs out of the aforementioned mental universe.

Maybe the most well-known and obvious case is that of Batman, the super-hero created by Bob Kane for the DC publishing house. One of the most familiar images that came out of comic-books, having reached worldwide fame, the center of his own modern mythic sphere, Batman, like Dracula, is also motivated in his actions by the absurdity of injustice (as a child he helplessly assists the assassination of his parents). Also like Dracula (and unlike the other super-heroic effigy, Superman), Batman cannot adapt

to a world that makes no sense in his conscience, that remains impenetrable, inexplicable and hostile.[39] Some trace his origins in satanic Romanticism, seeing him close to the dark vigilantes that populated the imagination of the nineteenth century, fighting alongside Good but wearing the clothes of Evil.[40] His dark cape and rubber mask, the bat as his symbol of a night creature, brought Batman the nicknames of "The Dark Knight" or the "Night Crusader". Some authors even identify a pornographic subtext in the Batman stories, pointing out his mask that reminds of the "rapists' rubber mask", seeing him as a "mixture of fear and sexual desire", using a real pornographic arsenal (chains, handcuffs, pointed boots).[41] This comes as a surprise, given the fact that in spite of the occasional flirts with Catwoman, his enemy and (platonic) lover, Batman's sexuality is completely absent: he sublimates his virility in his fight against crime, because for him, pathologically, sex equals death.[42]

Batman is a subtle kind of vampire, feeding on the fear he inflicts upon his enemies, who (luckily) stand on the wrong side of law (even if Batman's own methods are not accepted by the law, as in any classic case of the outlaw enforcing the law from the outside when it becomes incapable of imposing itself). Initially, Batman truly behaved as a dark avenger, killing his opponents by shooting them, but after two issues the editors decided to suppress this bloody aspect and the hero has never killed since (except in some experimental issues).[43] Occasionally Batman has to fight "real" vampires, in which case he remains the defender of humanity and his allegiances are clearly stated (on the other hand, Dracula has also had to fight other vampires, but his aura has remained equivocal).

6. The Anonymous Vampire

Most of the vampires in comics are not named and do not even show signs of identity (even if they bear a name, it is serenely forgettable). Secondary characters in hosts of short graphic horror stories, they usually represent just another threat – among others – that the true hero has to face. In this kind of stories, the particular abilities and motives of the vampires are not important. They come out of the common adverse bestiary (werewolves, zombies, skeletons, banshees, ghosts, spirits, demons, terrorists, and so on and so forth). The change in emphasis is more than obvious: if in the first vampire tales and the *Dracula* novel itself the vampire was an exceptional phenomenon, a powerful figure which required enormous resources and efforts to be defeated, by the end of the twentieth century the vampire has become mere "canon fodder" for the main characters who, by themselves, managed to suppress legions of puny and apparently harmless vampires (it so happens in series dedicated to heroes like Buffy, Blade or the new avatars of van Helsing). From the master of dark forces ready to take over the world, the vampire has turned, in the end, to be just another "nuisance".

This came as an inevitable change, as the result of overuse in the image of the vampire and the accommodation of the public to this idiom. If the original powers of the vampire were sufficient to provoke awe and fear (the original Dracula does not put up much of a fight after all, using only jumps, wall-crawling, animal domination, hypnosis or shape shifts), in the twentieth century, with its unprecedented technological progress (what vampire could resist machine-gun fire?), its real-life unbelievable hecatombs (what are a few victims killed by a vampire compared to the Holocaust?) and

the ever-expanding virtual worlds (what chances would a vampire stand against Superman or Luke Skywalker?) it lost its impact and capacity of provoking fear. The vampire, together with many other mythic constructs, had to undergo multiple readapting processes, to keep up with the exigencies of the contemporary public, resulting in even more scary mutants, cross-breeds and coalitions (Satan himself had to be permanently re-invented, because what scared one generation seemed like a giant plastic toy to the next).

7. The Spoof

Inevitably following the process of demythification of the vampire mentioned above, like in other literary or artistic fields, parody, irony and humor have affected this once terrifying figure. Hilarious comedies, jokes and caricatures have invaded this too sober scene and made the vampire a privileged target of *comedie-noire*. Making fun of stereotypes about vampires, from blood-sucking, bat resemblance, presupposed sexual vigor and the omnipresent Hungarian accent, such products have made the vampire seem like a truly harmless imaginary creature, a clumsy trickster, or a frustrated Prince of the Undead wannabe. Although it might be argued that this trend has contributed to weakening the image of the vampire and turning it into a laughing matter, personally I think that this was not the cause of its ”weakening”, but an effect of continuous laicization and giving up on popular beliefs. If the original *Dracula* novel had a huge impact due mostly to the folktales and beliefs that shaped a personification of human fears, the rationalization of thinking and technological progress have determined progressive but drastic changes in human spirituality and, derivatively, human fears (never eradicating them, though). Furthermore, this trivialization of the vampire figure did not bring it any prejudice: on the contrary, it deepened familiarization with the vampire, made it an all-known and accepted idea (and maybe the most successful Halloween costume). Without this light, humorous, and friendly aspect, the vampire might have lost terrain in the present-day public conscience, or it might have become just a relic among many other imaginary monsters of the past (such as the Old Man of the Sea or various elemental spirits) which did not benefit from profitable metamorphoses. By making fun of it, humanity has kept it close and “alive”, as one of the good and resourceful concepts it sometimes invents.

Conclusions

The vampire as a concept (if not as an actual presence) has been a partner of man from the beginning of known history. In many forms and practices, depending on geographical, historical, social and cultural context, the vampire is considered to have been the personified support of humanity’s most intimate fears, its enemy by nature, the complete stranger, the threatening Other. The folktales, beliefs and practices involving the vampire have provided plots for many high-culture works, from literature to paintings or sculpture. In their turn, these have influenced popular-culture productions, which have borrowed elements both from folklore and high-culture, shaping one of the most pungent and fascinating images humanity has ever created. Analyzing the vampires of a particular community or culture can reveal information about its inner codes, beliefs and relational mechanisms, and would be necessary for a thorough insight into that community or culture.

The presence of the vampire in comic books, as a visible manifestation of popular culture, is vivid and impressive, since it

greatly participated in the dissemination of the vampiric ethos in the twentieth century imageries. Although comics have taken their inspiration from oral folklore, literature or film, they have also generated and imposed new attributes and perspectives on the vampire's semantic sphere. In fact, through comics have been created some of the most memorable vampire types and practices, which have contributed substantially to this virtual universe, giving us even more reasons to say that the vampire, in its many forms, will haunt mankind and human imagination for a long time.

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Notes

[1] Theresa Bane, *Encyclopedia of Vampire Mythology*, p. 1.
[2] Not all of the vampires are undead (for example the *bruja* of Spain), not all of them are representations of evil (the Australian *talamaur* is a living person who may choose to serve good), not all of them feed on human blood (the *grobnik* from Bulgaria uses only cattle and animal carcasses) or blood at all (the Arabic *algul* thrives on rice and the Japanese *gaki* can even feed on thoughts generated by a meditating person). Of course, not all of them are bound to the realm of night, day-walkers being easy to find in Greek lore, African accounts or Middle-American tales. *Ibidem*, p. 2.
[3] *Ibidem*, p. 7.
[4] Sonia Faessel underlines the fact that in Ancient times those spirits rarely took human form, and only for the purpose of seduction. Sonia Faessel, *Vampirul*, in Pierre Brunel, *Miturile secolului XX*, vol. 2, p. 344.
[5] Victor Kernbach, *Dicționar de mitologie generală*, p. 613.
[6] Sonia Faessel, *op. cit.,* p. 345.
[7] Victor Kernbach, *op. cit*., p. 613.
[8] Matei Cazacu, *Dracula*, p. 316.
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 317.
[10] *Ibidem*, p. 317-318. The author clearly states that the territory of present-day Romania offers the richest documentation regarding this phenomenon which can be found in the central and south-eastern European area. The Hungarians and the Germans in Transylvania (Catholics, Calvinists and Lutherans), the Austrian authorities and the foreign travelers, they have all left documents expressing their own views on these archaic traditions and beliefs. *Ibidem*, p. 355.
[11] Theresa Bane, *op. cit.,* p. 2-3.
[12] *Ibidem*, p. 2.
[13] *Ibidem*, p. 8.
[14] *Ibidem*, p. 10.
[15] For more information, see Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 9-20 and Dodo Niță and Alexandru Ciubotariu, *Istoria benzii desenate româneşti 1891-2010*.
[16] See Tim Blackmore, *McCay's McChanical Muse: Engineering Comic-Strip Dreams*, p. 15. The author clearly cites Richard Marshall whose opinion is that the existence of comics is closely related to the printing technological revolution which allowed mass production and distribution, and Couperie, who states that "the history of comics is the history of its means of distribution".
[17] Kensuke Okabayashi, *Manga for Dummies*, p. 13.
[18] See his excellent work: Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation*.
[19] See Bradford Wright, *op. cit*., and Jim Steranko, *The Steranko History of Comics*, vol. 1 and 2. Umberto Eco places the source of the super-hero genre, the most successful type of comics, in the redeeming novels of the nineteenth century (Dumas, Sue, Hugo), issued from the "inferiority complex" of the bourgeoisie in the modern world, where anonymous and helpless individuals try to symbolically avenge their incapacity to change their destiny. *Apud* Philippe Forest, *Superman*, in Pierre Brunel, *op. cit*., vol. 2, p. 293.
[20] Bradford Wright, *op. cit*., p. 3.
[21] Sonia Faessel*, op. cit*., p. 349. Just looking at those figures makes us wonder if it would not be appropriate to create a new branch in the study of popular culture, "Dracula studies", keeping in mind that some of these "derived" products have reached wider fame than the book itself and have generated trends, fan clubs, phobias and have even drawn scholarly attention (Murnau's movie from 1921, where Dracula was played by the German actor Max Schreck,

Browning's movie from 1931, where Bela Lugosi offered perhaps the scariest Dracula, Fisher's movie from 1958, which started a series of "Draculas" played by Christopher Lee or the 1992 Coppola's movie, where Gary Oldman impersonated the most romantic Dracula up to date).

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 350. Science as the source of evil and the need to destroy its monstrous results for the sake of humanity is also to be found in Mary Shelley's masterpiece, *Frankenstein*, published in 1818.

[23] *Ibidem*, p. 346. The author considers this awe generated by the erotic alien to have penetrated deep into the social consciousness, stating that the male's Freudian obsession with his inability to sexually satisfy an irresistible exotic woman is to be found even in everyday vocabulary, where a word such as "vamp" is a direct derivative of "vampire". *Ibidem*, p. 347.

[24] *Ibidem*, p. 350.

[25] *Ibidem*, p. 350.

[26] Matei Cazacu, *op. cit.,* pp. 326-327.

[27] *Ibidem*, p. 342.

[28] Richard Reynolds. *Super Heroes. A Modern Mythology*, p. 7.

[29] Sonia Faessel, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

[30] *Ibidem*, p. 351.

[31] Sonia Faessel, *op. cit*., p. 354.

[32] Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch*, p. 56. The author says that all the super-heroes in comics show this dual sense of belonging, followed by the struggle between the two impulses coming out of it: the need to be accepted in the new society and even to "conquer" it on its own terms, and the equally strong need to keep one's own cultural identity.

[33] Issue 9/1973.

[34] Issue 66/1978. "What have you done to me, Satan? Why do you make me doubt my actions? Why do you make me worry whether I've done right or wrong?," yells the humiliated omnipotent lord of the undead. p. 3.

[35] Issue 69/1979.

[36] Issue 61/1977.

[37] Issue 66/1978, p. 18.

[38] See, for example, the *American Vampire* series, started in March 2010 and still going on.

[39] For a thorough analysis of the Batman epos, see Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes. A Modern Mythology.*

[40] Apud Philippe Forest, *Superman*, in Pierre Brunel, *op. cit*., vol. 2, p. 293.

[41] Aaron Taylor, "'He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be Fast, and He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life': Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body", p. 345

[42] *Ibidem*, p. 356. Batman, the author adds, is the exponent of a "fluid super-heroic body", transgressing the border between animals and humans, but also between humans and machines.

[43] Les Daniels, *DC Comics: 60 Years of the World's Favorite Comics Book Heroes*, pp. 36-37.