

Resurrecting Dracula: A Review of *Renfield*¹ and *The Last Voyage of the Demeter*²

One of Dracula's most enduring qualities is that he always comes back. And, since horror films first started to adapt Bram Stoker's 1897 novel in the early twentieth century, this undead monster has been resurrected again and again across film and television. Though it is difficult to give an exact number of *Dracula* adaptations, to date Wikipedia notes 111 entries in the category "Dracula in film." Notable entries include offerings from Universal and Hammer Films – with icons of the genre Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee in the title role of Dracula – Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 *Bram Stoker's Dracula* and with countless other series and standalone films. It is a hard undertaking, then, to create a new Dracula film that stands out among the already vast crowd of "Dracula" films, and even more so to conceive of a new interpretation of the vampiric count himself. Yet this is exactly what *Renfield* and *The Last Voyage of the Demeter* have done.

Renfield and *Demeter*, both released in 2023, each offer a fresh twist on a classic vampire tale. Moreover, while revamping Dracula's monstrosity, both films also present something of a return to older things. *Renfield* is one of the latest releases in the Universal Monsters series, and in fact it operates as a sequel to Universal's 1931 *Dracula*. Here, Nicolas Cage stars as the Count and Nicholas Hoult takes up the role of Renfield – a character created by Universal that merges the novel's English Lawyer Jonathan Harker and mental patient Renfield – and several scenes from the original 1931 version starring Bela Lugosi and Dwight Frye are reshot with Cage and Hoult. Despite this evocation of the earlier film, however, this is a twenty-first century nightmare. Cage's Dracula realizes that he must adapt his vampiric aims to align with the values of our contemporary capitalist society. Similarly, the film itself bleeds through genre boundaries to please a modern audience; and as an action-horror-comedy, it diverges from its 1931 predecessor with its addition of violently choreographed fight scenes and biting satirical humor.

In contrast, *Demeter* returns to the novel itself, and focuses on a single chapter often eschewed or only briefly featured in previous *Dracula* films. In Stoker's novel, the Captain's log details the nightmarish journey of a ship called the *Demeter* as its crew unknowingly transport Dracula from Romania to Whitby. One by one, the crew are preyed upon by Dracula until the *Demeter* dramatically crashes on British shores in the midst of a storm, and with the dead Captain tied to the ship's wheel. We already know how this story ends, then, but this film lingers on the hellish journey itself, introducing us to characters that we know are all doomed. Director André Øvredal has described the film as "*Alien-on-a-ship* in 1897,"³ and – like *Alien* – it certainly plays on the claustrophobia inherent in being trapped on an inescapable vessel with a monster. The director has explored the single-location horror film before in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2019). This period horror is all the more terrifying: the horror of *Demeter* is not just that the ship's crew are trapped with a monster, but that perhaps, out at sea, even God has abandoned them.

Though *Renfield* and *The Demeter* offer vastly different interpretations of *Dracula*, they are united in their exploration of capitalism in relation to vampirism. As Nick Groom suggests, the vampire aesthetic is "inescapably capitalist."⁴ In the eighteenth century, Voltaire famously described stock-jobbers, brokers and men of business as being vampires

¹ Written by Ryan Ridley, directed by Chris McKay. Skybound Entertainment, 2023.

² Written by Bragi F. Schut Jr. and Zak Olkewicz, directed by André Øvredal. Universal Pictures, 2023.

³ Clark Collis, "Dracula sets sail in trailer for horror movie *The Last Voyage of the Demeter*," *Entertainment Weekly*, April 13, 2023, <https://ew.com/movies/the-last-voyage-of-the-demeter-trailer-andre-ovredal-interview/>.

⁴ Nick Groom, *The Vampire: A New History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 148.

who “sucked the blood of the people in broad daylight,”⁵ while Karl Marx, in his foundational critique of capitalism, exploited metaphorical vampirism to characterize capital as “dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.”⁶ Stoker’s *Dracula* embodies this capitalist practice and aesthetic: he sleeps surrounded by boxes filled with gold coins; his attempt to conquer Britain is partially realized through turning Lucy Westenra into a vampire, and partially through an expansion of his property portfolio in Britain; and, when he is shot, he appears to bleed gold. *Renfield’s* *Dracula* manifests similar notions of capitalist domination. Here, Dracula and Renfield have a typical master-servant, or a boss-worker, relationship. Renfield carries out Dracula’s dirty work as he gathers victims to satiate his boss’s appetite, while Dracula keeps his servant under his control by declaring “I am your only salvation.” Satirizing America’s privatized health-care system, Dracula even provides Renfield with his blood in lieu of a health-care plan: “His blood has the power to heal the injured. And there’s not even a copay. Unless you consider my soul.” God is absent in this film and for Renfield – and therefore other workers, too – salvation can only be achieved through work and servitude. Or at least, so it first appears. Renfield initially tries to subvert the system he is working within by feeding Dracula other people’s bad bosses. Later, when Dracula teams up with the mafia in order to achieve his goal of domination in the modern world by dividing everyone into “followers or food,” Renfield finally stands up to his boss and takes his own power back: “You didn’t have to use your power to make me your servant, because I gave all my power to you. And I can take it back.”

God is similarly absent in *Demeter*, and Dracula exploits this absence. Notably, the crew are forsaken by God because their decision to (unknowingly) transport Dracula for their own financial gain has caused their damnation. In a confrontation with Dracula that calls attention to their state of perdition, the ship’s captain seeks God’s protection as he holds up a crucifix and utters “I renounce you devil”; but this is not enough, and as God fails to intervene and offer protection, Dracula sinks his teeth into the captain’s neck. Dracula is portrayed as an unnatural embodiment of evil, and his monstrosity is reflected in his physical appearance. Gone is the well-dressed gentlemanly monster we have become familiar with on film and as performed by actors such as Lugosi and Cage; instead, this is a nightmarish version of a winged, devilish creature more akin to Barlow in *Salem’s Lot* (1979). At first, we see only glimpses of Dracula as he keeps to the shadows and feeds on livestock and the ship’s dog. Yet, as the crew’s source of sustenance is depleted, and as they start to fall victim to him too, they are faced with a choice: change course to seek food and medical assistance, or keep going and keep the bonus they have been promised to be paid upon early delivery of their cargo in England. It is only after they choose the latter option that Dracula fully reveals himself, and their fate inescapable. Dracula emerges from the shadows, no longer hiding himself and sparing no one.

“We’re a doomed crew on a doomed ship,” proclaims one *Demeter* crew member, “We don’t plot our own course. The devil below does, and we all know where he plans to deliver us: to hell, one by one.” *Demeter* is bleak throughout, particularly as those familiar with Stoker’s novel or previous films already know this story will end not with the destruction of Dracula, but with the annihilation of the ship and every living being on it. For *Renfield*, however, the ending is hopeful. Dracula is the embodiment of vampiric capitalism in which an individual’s value is seen only in terms of how they can contribute to a society built on selfishness and greed. Yet, as Renfield successfully overthrows his boss, his final

⁵ François Voltaire, “Vampires,” in *A Philosophical Dictionary* [1770], vol. 10, trans. William F. Fleming (Paris, London, New York, Chicago: E. R. Dumont, 1901), <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/35630/pg35630-images.html>.

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* [1867], vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Champaign: Modern Barbarian Press, 2018).

voice over narration ends with a call to action: if Renfield can find the power to face his demons, then maybe everyone can.

Mary Going, University of Sheffield

REFERENCES

Collis, Clark. "Dracula sets sail in trailer for horror movie *The Last Voyage of the Demeter*." *Entertainment Weekly*, April 13, 2023. <https://ew.com/movies/the-last-voyage-of-the-demeter-trailer-andre-ovredal-interview/>.

Groom, Nick. *The Vampire: A New History*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* [1867]. Vol. 1. Translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. Champaign: Modern Barbarian Press, 2018.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/35630/pg35630-images.html>

Voltaire, François. "Vampires." In *A Philosophical Dictionary* [1770]. Translated by William F. Fleming. Vol. 10. Paris, London, New York, Chicago: E. R. Dumont, 1901.