Decadence and Decay in Paul Morrissey's *Blood for Dracula* (1974)

BY IAN MURPHY
Manchester Metropolitan University

ABSTRACT

The overarching theme of Paul Morrissey's *Blood for Dracula*, aka *Andy Warhol's Dracula* (1974), is the vampire's inability to achieve an idealized reality. Freed by his mythical status and aristocratic heritage from the realities of everyday human existence, Dracula lives a life of hedonistic excess. Yet, one thing evades the vampire: virgin blood, which no amount of wealth or power can acquire. In the disarmingly simple opening scene of *Blood for Dracula*, in which Dracula applies cosmetics before a mirror, Morrissey employs a heightened artificiality and a depiction of decadence that foreshadows Dracula's ultimate downfall at the film's conclusion. Briefly establishing the use of decadent aesthetics in the early films of Andy Warhol (by way of the Decadence the *fin de siècle*), this featurette analyzes Morrissey's contrasting depiction of decadence. Through analysis of the mise-en-scène of the opening scene of *Blood for Dracula*, it will be discussed how Morrissey utilizes artifice to signify Dracula's decay, and how Dracula's anomie allows others to seek power and pleasure at his expense.

In Andy Warhol's *Mario Banana* (1964), a bejewelled drag queen (Mario Montez) silently and seductively peels and devours a banana for three minutes. Camp, cultic, and voyeuristic, *Mario Banana* embodies all of the aesthetic elements that would come to signify Warhol's early films. Inspired by early Hollywood's presentation of performers as icons, Warhol's films eschewed plot and psychology in favour of the fleeting and the ephemeral, Warhol refining the films' stars into a radiating, glamorous essence. From behind his camera, Warhol simply watched as his superstars were forced to enact a meagre premise and to provide a performance that transcended their surroundings. Warhol's early films, Jon Davies writes, developed out of the social milieu of Warhol's studio, The Factory, with its ambience of "casual decadence, witty one-upmanship, [and] hard-won glamour" (27). "Decadent" is an apt descriptor of The Factory. Replete with drag queens, androgynous socialites, hustlers, and junkies, The Factory was a crucible of exhibitionism and deleterious sensualism. In capturing this spectacle on film, Warhol synthesized art with life, and projected it onto the silver screen.

Reverberating through The Factory's walls were echoes of *fin de siècle* Decadence. At the *fin de siècle*, Decadent writers and artists, resisting the clamour of political, scientific, and cultural revolutions, embraced self-destructive hedonism and exalted in the ephemeral nature of life, their work replete with images of anxiety, stagnation, destruction and decay (Desmarais & Baldick 5). Figures such as Oscar Wilde, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Aubrey Beardsley pre-figured the Warholian style of pursuing and documenting all possible sensory pleasures. Chronicling these pleasures in their work, the Decadents divorced art and beauty from didactic moralism, proclaiming an art-for-art's-sake mantra, and shocked the bourgeois with seductive images of vice and sin. Indeed, Beardsley's illustrations of vampiric femmes fatales and sybaritic androgynes are evoked in the wearied flesh, artificial beauty, and grotesque wit of Montez in *Mario Banana*. Decadence, however, historically presages a decline—the term "decadence" stemming from the Latin *cadēre*, "to fall" (Weir 1). In *fin de siècle* Britain, Decadence flourished in urban centres as the empire declined. Were Warhol's experiments the swansong of the 1960s counterculture, or even of the fine arts as a medium? By absorbing pop culture into the arts, Warhol redefined and undermined the avant-garde, and mechanically distributed it for mass cultural consumption.

Warhol's input into his films receded after 1968. Under Warhol's imprimatur, Paul Morrissey took over directorial duties, and directed a sequence of films from 1968–74, each successively less Warholian. As a director, Morrissey emphasized humanity and narrative over Warhol's provocative, un-evolving

mise-en-scène. Gone was Warhol's experimentalism in favour of the façade of casual authenticity. Decadence, however, remained a central tenet of Morrissey's oeuvre. Maurice Yacowar writes that Morrissey, disillusioned by "Warhol's mechanical, passive stare […] is compelled to feel […] for the human ruins in his focus" (37). Unlike Warhol, Morrissey evokes pathos for his decadent characters, and ambivalently questions the cultures in which they thrive and decline. Morrissey's films thus repeatedly dramatize the decline of a coherent social and moral order as his characters, questing for full expression of their individualistic egos, succumb to unimpeded indulgence.

Morrissey's penultimate film under Warhol's name, *Blood for Dracula* (1974), was a liberal adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897)—itself a repository of anxieties concerning the declining British Empire. As Fred Botting writes, Stoker's vampires represent the "threat of wanton and corrupt sexuality", their "decadence, nocturnal existence and indiscriminate desires" distinguishing the vampire as a licentious, polymorphous threat to Victorian notions of race, sexuality, gender, religion and life itself (141). Morrissey's vampire embodies a similar, nocturnal landscape of decadent mutability, exemplified in *Blood for Dracula*'s opening sequence—a short scene of exaggerated artifice, in which Count Dracula (Udo Kier) sits before a mirror and uses cosmetics to paint a human mask onto his deathly-pale countenance. On initial viewing, this ritual of physical refinement seemingly represents nothing more than an act of artificial humanization. Repeated viewings, however, disprove this theory. Rather, Dracula's application of cosmetics before a mirror encapsulates the decadence and decay of the Dracula line, and foreshadows the reduction of an ancient, aristocratic ancestry to a single, mutilated corpse at the film's denouement (Fig. 1).

Having renounced social relationships, Dracula has withdrawn into the cloistered realm of his ornate castle. Surrounded by antique books and taxidermy birds of prey, Dracula is entombed within a dead past over which he is master (Fig. 2). Yet Dracula's mastery is crippled by a humiliating dependency on virgin blood. Having drained Romania dry, Dracula flees to Italy where he is seduced by the aristocratic di Fiore family's false promise of virginal daughters. Unbeknownst to Dracula, the marriageable di Fiore daughters have already been bedded by the overtly virile Marxist handyman, Mario (Joe Dallessandro), thus rendering their blood "tainted". Upon tasting this "tainted" blood, Dracula graphically retches to rid his body of the blood's impurities, and subsequently withers into a weakened husk (Fig. 3). As Yacowar writes, in Dracula's "corrupted world, sex means death for the great romantic hero" (87). Capitalizing on the vampire's weakening emetic exsanguinations, Mario dismembers Dracula and stakes him through the heart. Unimpeded, Mario becomes the de facto master of the di Fiore estate, representing a transition of power from the crumbling aristocracy to the proletariat. This violent conclusion, terminating both Dracula and the narrative, realizes a prophetic vision suggested in the film's introductory scene.

Fig. 1 | The helpless, mutilated body of Dracula as Mario prepares to stake him, 01:40:16. Euro International Film, 1974.

Fig. 2 | Dracula, contemplating the lifeless possessions over which he presides, 00:04:50. Euro International Film, 1974.

Fig. 3 | Dracula retching after having drank "tainted" blood, 01:15:54. Euro International Film, 1974.

Blood for Dracula opens with a static, shallow focus close-up of Dracula's face, which dominates the right plane of the frame. Dracula's powdery white complexion is offset by Kier's glacial blue eyes that plaintively gaze beyond the frame's limits (Fig. 4). Simultaneously, Claudio Gizzi's melancholic nocturne plays as the opening credits dissolve in and out over the unfocused left plane of the frame. Exuding a languorous, mournful simplicity, Gizzi's composition articulates the sorrowful contemplativeness of Dracula's stare. Morrissey maintains this mise-en-scène as Dracula dyes his eyebrows black and contours his cheeks with rouge (Fig. 5). Whilst painting his lips (the

Fig. 4 | The opening shot, in which Dracula plaintively stares beyond the frame, 00:00:00. Euro International Film, 1974.

Fig. 6 | Dracula exposes his fangs whilst painting his lips red, 00:01:29. Euro International Film, 1974.

Fig. 5 | Dracula dyes his eyebrows black, 00:00:16. Euro International Film, 1974.

Fig. 7 | Dracula dying his white hair black, 00:02:04. Euro International Film, 1974.

lower lip red, the upper lip black) Dracula exposes his fangs (Fig. 6), his vampirism revealed through aesthetics rather than action. Morrissey here plays with Dracula as a cultural icon, a set of fangs the only signifier necessary to convey his vampiric nature. Revealing this nature within a prolonged static tableau of heightened artificiality, Morrissey makes known Dracula's apathy and vanity. Gone is the relentless, batlike hovering of Max Schreck's Count Orlok (*Nosferatu,* 1922), as is the genteel omnipresence of Christopher Lee's stately Count (*Dracula*, 1958). Despite mimicking Bela Lugosi's pale skin and elegant widow's peak, Kier's Dracula shares more in common, both aesthetically and psychologically, with Conrad Veidt's sleepwalker, Cesare, from Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920). Both Kier and Veidt possess a similarly sculpted, artificially painted face. And, both Dracula and Cesare are introduced as somnambulistically gazing at visions beyond the audience's field of view. When actualized, these visions articulate the violent downfall of their subjects, of which neither Dracula nor Cesare can stop from occurring.

As the camera slowly pans out to a medium wide shot, Dracula, now central within the frame, is revealed to be seated within a red chamber illuminated by a blazing fire. Dracula sits before a vanity table, strewn with a melange of powders and pigments, one of which is an inky-black dye that Dracula combs through his shock of white hair (Fig. 7). Contrasting his seemingly youthful appearance, Dracula's white hair—slicked back and cropped at the nape of the neck—unsettles, a symbol of something once thriving but now diminished. Despite his attempts to affect a human façade, Dracula's demeanour eerily contrasts the naturalism with which the other characters are presented. Dracula's artificiality most strikingly differs from the oft-unadorned Mario, who repeatedly exposes naked flesh in acts of voluptuousness and vigorous assertion (Fig. 8). Thus, visually, Dracula's use of cosmetics contradictorily reinforces his inhumanness. Venerating cosmetics as a defiance of nature, the Decadent poet Charles Baudelaire wrote that the application of make-up transformed the wearer into an *objet d'art*, "something superior and divine" (427). Coincidentally, Baudelaire wrote that Dracula's chosen colours of adornment, red and black, represent a "supernatural and excessive life" (427). Yet, Baudelaire's wearer of *maquillage* is a woman. Inverting Baudelaire's gendered assertion, Morrissey affirms the notion of the vampire as a perverter of gender and sexual norms. Emphasizing Dracula's artificiality thus reinforces his decadent alterity, his languor the fatigue of one detached from nature. Powdered and rouged, Dracula undergoes a decadent aestheticization of the self, prophesizing his own inevitable demise.

Whilst Dracula continues to dye his hair, the camera arcs around him to reveal the mirror, in which Dracula—in accordance with vampire lore—bears no reflection. The camera then switches to a POV shot and pans in on the focus of Dracula's stare: the now seemingly empty chair he sits on. Morrissey halts

Fig. 8 | Mario, stripped to the waist, chops wood with the axe he will later use to dismember Dracula, 01:22:30. Euro International Film, 1974.

Fig. 9 | The reflection of the "empty" chair Dracula sits on, 00:02:33. Euro International Film, 1974.

motion in this frame-within-a-frame, presenting the viewer with the static image of Dracula's empty reflection (Fig. 9). Yacowar argues that this image acts as a climactic revelation, emphasizing "what is not seen" (83). Morrissey's emphasis on the void reflected in the mirror, Yacowar continues, heightens the tension between "the substantial and the phantom" (83). This prolonged, static image is an omen of Dracula's unbecoming, prophesizing the reduction of Dracula's corporeal form into a mutilated corpse and his eventual dissolution into nothingness at the close of the film. Gazing at his vacant reflection, Dracula foresees the extinction of his line. Not only has Dracula's dependence on the scarce "pure" blood of Europe rendered him weak, but it has also exposed him to Mario's insurgent attempts to seize power from the upper classes. Breaking the static shot, the "empty" chair is pushed back as Dracula rises. Panning to the floor, Dracula's feet are seen exiting the chamber, a departure from both the screen and civilization.

Mario's final revolt against the aristocracy is neither Morrissey's championing of a Marxist cause, nor the lamenting of a lost nobility, but something much more ambivalent. Although neither vampirically thirsting for blood like Dracula, nor beleaguered by the financial and moral bankruptcy of the di Fiore family, Mario is equally corrupt, prone to sexual exploitation and violence to achieve his ideals. The final power shift in *Blood for Dracula* is therefore just one predatory politic consuming the former. Stressing the cyclical nature of both life and of power structures, Morrissey asserts that, if allowed to rule unimpeded, Mario too shall succumb to self-gratifying desires, and will be reduced to a physical presence with no reflection. As Carlo Altinier writes, "society itself materializes the vampire" (181). Thus, *Blood for Dracula* begins and concludes with a melancholy and pessimistic premise: regardless of the system, humanity is destined for corruption, decadence, and decline. ▪

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