

Media Review Essay

The Last Voyage of the Demeter (2023) and *Renfield* (2023)

Carol Senf

For those of us who appreciate interesting adaptations of *Dracula*, 2023 was an exciting year, with the release of two films that encourage us to rethink both Stoker's novel and its numerous adaptations. While neither *Renfield* (Universal; directed by Chris McKay) or *The Last Voyage of the Demeter* (Universal, directed by Andre Overdal) attempts to recapture the novel as a whole in the way that Francis Ford Coppola did in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1993), each film takes something from Stoker's novel (the character Renfield or "The Captain's Log" in *Demeter*) and uses it to provide the center for a fresh reading/viewing. Moreover, what is even more interesting for someone like me who tends to see books and films as means of providing insights into the period that produced them is that fact that both unabashedly focus on the primal evil of the *Dracula* character. There is no inkling of the romantic vampire seeking his lost love in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* or the charming character in Badham's *Dracula* (1979). Instead, there is only hunger and a vague desire to dominate the humans who appear ill-equipped to challenge him. What, if anything, does this emphasis on unremitting violence tell us about the time in which we live?

Despite the similarity in the *Dracula* character and the fact that each film focuses on ways to combat such evil, the films differ significantly in other ways. Adapted from a short story by Robert Kirkman (who also produced the film) *Renfield* focuses on the conflict between Robert Montague Renfield (played by Nicholas Hoult) and *Dracula* (played with screen chewing glee by Nicholas Cage) and is set in modern New Orleans. No longer incarcerated in an insane asylum, Renfield is a member of a support group for people attempting to end codependency, in his case a

toxic employer who promises him much but never delivers. Having abandoned his wife and daughter a hundred years earlier to follow Dracula, Renfield is tired of procuring victims for his master. In fact, having originally joined the group to procure the blood of people no one will miss, he discovers that Dracula is a narcissist from whose control he must escape.

While the film is full of references to contemporary psychology and self-help, *Renfield* is also aware of its predecessors. Renfield's diet of insects, though, is no longer a pathology but is now a means of giving him superhuman strength. There are also numerous allusions to the 1931 Tod Browning *Dracula* film. Not only are both Renfield characters real estate lawyers, but Cage's costume and mannerisms echo Bela Lugosi. Indeed, *Renfield* opens with a black-and-white scene in which Cage and Hoult replace Bela Lugosi and Dwight Frye, a composite designed to acknowledge its predecessor. Subsequent black and white scenes continue to echo the Browning film even though most of the film takes place in a very bright color pallet of yellows, pinks, and turquoise and modern architecture. Gone are the castles and gloomy settings, a decision that provides a constant reminder to the viewer that *Renfield* is a new kind of *Dracula* film.

Aside from the tropical colors and the contrast to previous films, what distinguishes *Renfield* from its predecessors is the quantity of blood and the degree of physical violence that takes place, with bodies literally exploding on screen and blood splattered everywhere. While the film handles this violence with a degree of camp, it is not designed for the squeamish. There's good reason that it is R Rated (Children under 17 must be accompanied by an adult) by the Motion Picture Association of America while the British Board of Film Classification lowers the age to 15 and over.

The violence continues even after Renfield decides to accept the motto of the support group – “I am enough.” – and go off on his own, and Dracula joins a prominent NO crime family to

secure victims for himself. At this point, *Renfield* becomes more crime drama with Renfield allying himself with Rebecca, a NO policewoman, to arrest members of the crime family and rescue Rebecca's sister who had been taken prisoner by them. Rebecca and Renfield hack Dracula's body into pieces, which they encase in concrete and scatter through the city's water system though they also salvage enough of Dracula's blood to heal Rebecca's sister and to bring the members of the support group back to life. With the conclusion, the film once again echoes Stoker's novel in which the original Renfield escapes from Dracula's power over him when he attempts to save Mina Harker. Though Stoker's character subsequently dies, Stoker suggests that he has regained his humanity by breaking free of Dracula's power. Similarly, *Renfield* suggests that the eponymous character has finally regained his humanity as well as he continues to participate in the support group and to enjoy a relationship with Rebecca.

While the setting, color pallet, and reliance on contemporary self-help strategies remind viewers that *Renfield* is a new kind of *Dracula* film, *The Last Voyage of the Demeter* (Universal; directed by Andre Ovredal) incorporates its new approach in more subtle ways, introducing a cast of new characters: Dr. Clemens (played by Corey Hawkins), the Black Cambridge graduate who reminds the audience of the lack of opportunities available to people of color; Anna (Aisling Franciosi), Dracula's Romanian victim, demonstrates extraordinary strength of character in the face of the sailors' misogyny; and Toby, the captain's young grandson (Woody Norman) whose life and ultimate death humanize the crew of the *Demeter* and cause them to band together to destroy the evil that had killed him. No longer the almost anonymous victims of Stoker's novel, the crew is fully individualized. Furthermore, the film echoes contemporary readings of Stoker's novel, with Clemens clearly suggesting both the many scientific interpretations as well as its postcolonial ones. Anna's emotional strengths echo many feminist readings of *Dracula*, and the

sailors remind the viewer that technology was changing their world in 1897, the year in which the events take place. The *Demeter* is a beautifully crafted wooden sailing ship, but frequent references to the rise of steam travel echo Stoker's repeated references to the fact that the world is changing. Even though most the film takes place on board the *Demeter*, it begins with the ship washed up on the shore at Whitby and concludes with Clemens in London vowing to pursue "the foul beast." A brief flashback to Varna, Bulgaria, where Dracula's earth boxes are loaded on board, also provides a glimpse of what life was like for Dr. Clemens and for the other sailors who are all confronted with forces beyond their control, whether it be the casual racism that plagues Clemens or the advent of technology the sailors face. Clemens is initially turned down when he applies for a position as a member of the crew even though he makes it clear that he wants to return to England. (We learn later that he had been hired as a physician by the king of Romania who apparently expected a white physician rather than a Black one.)

The film hints at the horror to come when the waggoneers transporting Dracula's earth boxes refuse to help load the ship, saying they must leave before sundown. However, the early days on board provide a pleasant interlude with Toby introducing Dr. Clemens to the ship and its contents as well as insights into the various crew members. Viewers learn, for example, that this is the last voyage for Captain Eliot (Liam Cunningham) who plans to retire to Ireland along with his grandson, and that the crew members have been together on previous voyages. The character that stands out from the rest is Joseph (Jon Jon Briones), the cook, who articulates typical religious views and thus provides an obvious contrast to the more scientific Clemens. Their conversations reveal, however, that both search for truth and echo Stoker's awareness of different ideologies at the *fin de siècle*.

Having established the crew members as human beings viewers can care about, the film turns to drama and action once Clemens discovers the dying Anna in the hold and, over the objections of crew members who object to having a woman on board, saves her by transfusing his blood directly into her veins, a direct reference to the science in Stoker's novel. Shortly thereafter, the animals on board, including Toby's beloved Lab Huck, are killed. Close ups of animals with throats slit and bodies drained of blood justify an R rating from the MPAA, and the film is equally clear about what Dracula does to his human victims even if the violence here is less dramatic than in *Renfield*. Fingers point at Clemens though he offers the scientific explanation, rabies, because he is too scientific to contemplate supernatural evil. Most of the remaining scenes take place at night, a decision that puts Dracula always in shadow, his hideousness revealed only briefly. Unlike the pastel pallet and explosive blood of *Renfield*, the deaths here are revealed mostly by transformations in Dracula's victims though the nighttime scenes also emphasize the mysteries of their inhuman opponent. Only with the death of Toby does the crew band together to destroy the evil in their midst, with the formerly ostracized Anna offering guidance based on her intimate knowledge of the monster, a subtle nod to Stoker's Mina Harker.

Once the English shore is sighted, the crew attempts to sink the *Demeter*, and Clemens confronts Dracula, pointing out his lack of humanity in the brief "You feed." Only Clemens and Anna manage to escape, however, on some of the wreckage of the *Demeter*, but Dracula controls the wind that takes the ship into Whitby harbor. The rising sun burns Anna who sinks into the ocean though not before she rejects Clemens offer of another transfusion. She acknowledges that death is her only way to escape Dracula's hold on her.

The film ends in London with Clemens seeing Dracula in a pub and announcing to the audience, "And so I will pursue this foul beast." He had not found truth in his scientific and medical

studies, but he has found his mission pursuing the monster he had seen on the *Demeter*. Interestingly, the color pallet remains somber at this point, possibly because, with Dracula still very much alive, the world remains shrouded in darkness, and Clemens is very much alone in his quest.

While the two films look very different, there is one strong point of similarity, the recognition that the evil Dracula represents still exists despite human attempts to destroy it. Previous films read the conclusion to Stoker's novel as the destruction of Dracula and the victory of modern humanity over an ancient evil, despite Stoker's more nuanced ending: that Dracula is not destroyed and that his European opponents are deluding themselves when they return to Transylvania. In both *Renfield* and *The Last Voyage of the Demeter*, Dracula is still alive. Renfield continues to attend meetings of the support group, but he and Rebecca know that Dracula will one day manage to reunite himself, and Clemens knows that his opponent has found a ready source of blood in London. The conflict that Stoker identified as the battle between Good and Evil, past and present, continues in these films, but the human opponents seem even less prepared than Stoker's to confront such powerful evil. Their lack of preparedness is possibly the reason that we today need to see these films. Both hold a mirror up to Stoker's novel and to the classic film adaptations that follow, and both remind us of a more philosophical lesson: that deeply flawed human beings are worth fighting for even if humans have lost their conviction of what is needed to annihilate the evil in our midst. *Renfield* and *The Last Voyage of the Demeter* are imperfect films, but they are both worth seeing for anyone interested in vampires in general and Dracula in particular.

Carol Senf, School of Literature, Media, and Communication, Georgia Institute of Technology.