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Shute

Film Analysis Assignment #2

1)

Blacula as a character is largely dichotomized into 2 different personalities, a noble former prince, and a stereotypical buck character type. Mamuwalde is typically marked as one or the other by his facial hair. With a few exceptions, he is clean shaven when acting as the nobleman and has a much more dramatic V-shaped hairline and mutton chops when acting as the buck. Mamuwalde’s nobility is evident in various scenes.

In the opening scene of the movie, Mamuwalde has an audience with Count Dracula in 1780 at his castle as he attempts to convince him to abolish the slave trade (Crain :54-3:12). Of particular note in this scene is when Dracula says “I meant no insult, Prince (Crain 2:43),” making the Mamuwalde’s connection to nobility explicit as the movie begins. In addition, William Marshall, the actor playing Mamuwalde, was described by Lehmen and Browning as “ a fine Shakespearean actor for whom-at a staggering six feet, five inches, sporting a brawny physique, and commanding a baritone voice-the part seemed written” (Lehmen and Browning, p.24). Marshall’s “Shakespearean” delivery seeps through every line he delivers and through every mannerism he displays (at least as a nobleman). This further develops Mamuwalde’s nobility by associating him with the 1970’s perception of Shakespeare as a genre appreciated and indicative of the educated upper class (i.e. nobility). This is evident the first time Mamuwalde goes to the club to return Tina’s purse, where he is formally introduced to Dr. Thomas and Tina’s sister Michelle for her birthday party. Mamuwalde kisses Michelle’s hand, orders French champagne and gives a well-spoken toast to people he has barely met, indicating his nobility (Crain 37:40-38:47). Similarly, the second time Mamuwalde goes to the club, he and Dr. Thomas have a discussion about vampires and how the police department expects a vampire to be responsible for recent killings. Without incriminating himself, Mamuwalde is able to answer Dr. Thomas’s questions, even getting him to admit “You seem well informed” (Crain 1:04:25). Having a doctor credit Mamuwalde's intelligence can be interpreted as a sign of his nobility because of the education so often associated with nobility, combined with Mamuwalde’s apparent lack of a more “formal” schooling, like grad school.

As stated earlier, when Dracula goes around attacking people, he is reminiscent of the buck character type. The buck is known first and foremost as a rapist, particularly of white women. In addition, the buck is known for an overabundance of almost primitive anger and violence, usually towards well-to-do white people. Although in *Blacula*, there aren’t any white women around for Blacula to rape (i.e. bite), an argument can be made that his first victim, a gay white antique dealer, was portrayed in a very feminine light. With a bit of stretching, there may be a way to interpret this first attack as paralleling the buck’s rape of white women.

Taking a closer look at this scene, both gay antique dealers, Billy, and Bobby, are going through the spoils of their latest purchase, Dracula’s castle. Billy is wearing a full blue suit with a white undershirt and cuffs (marking his neck, hands, and feet!), while Bobby is wearing a leather jacket, a pale floral shirt, and khaki pants. As Billy picks the lock on Blacula’s coffin, Bobby gets a giant gash running up his right arm. Billy runs over to patch him up and stop the bleeding, saying things like “what did you do? Let me see”, “Don’t panic”, “hold this there”, “just a second”, “you’re so dizzy, that’s the trouble”, and “I’m not a nurse, y’know”, among other quick quips, all while Bobby is largely ineffectual, whining and complaining. During this frankly inefficient first aid session, Blacula has gotten out of his casket, wearing the same suit he was buried in, covered in facial hair, fangs out, and hobbled over to Billy and Bobby with a deranged, animalistic (primitive?) look in his eyes. Blacula growls a little bit, tosses Billy to the side, and then bites Bobby’s arm while pinning him by the neck, vampirizing him. (Crain 14:17-15:46). Bobby’s floral shirt, long hair, and gestures can be seen as an attempt to feminize him, thus turning Blacula’s bite into a metaphorical rape of the white woman, typical of the buck type.

Later, as Blacula chases Tina through the streets of LA, he gets hit by a taxi. As the driver gets out and chastises Blacula for getting run over, Blacula largely ignores her. It is not until she calls him “boy”, that Blacula seems to pay any attention to her at all. He promptly proceeds to bite her, then run off. (Crain 24:36-26:00). Although not explicitly covered in class, with a bit of extrapolation of the buck character type, it would not be difficult to imagine the prototypical buck turning to anger and violence after being emasculated in such a fashion, further strengthening the connection between Blacula and the buck type. Finally, as an example of how Blacula highlights the buck’s affinity with attacking white people, consider the scene where Tina gets shot by a white police officer trying to hit Mamuwalde in an underground chemical plant. Blacula initially turns to aid Tina, but as the officer rushes him, Blacula swiftly grabs the officer, throws him into the metal pipes lining the corridor, and beats him over the head several times before turning back to Tina (Crain 1:24:38-1:25:14). When it is shown that Blacula can kill a man just by choking him for a few seconds (Crain 1:08:36), the amount of force he used on the white officer that shot Tina can only be described as excessive, reminiscent of the buck type.

The inclusion of both of these very different views of Dracula can be viewed as a satirization of the buck type as a whole. Typically, Hollywood characters offer a much simpler character to play the buck. In a sense, the prototypical buck’s only contribution to the plot is to threaten the white women with his desire to rape them, and set up the (typically white) protagonist as the hero by providing him with a primitive, very unapologetic bad guy to be easily conquered. However, Blacula is shown to be much more complex than this. Firstly, his nobility that has already been discussed at length pokes fun at the fact that nearly all bucks thus far have been primitivized to such an extreme degree (as in *The Birth of a Nation*). Furthermore, the clear divide between Mamuwalde as a former prince and Mamuwalde as a buck again satirizes the buck by showing what ridiculous lengths Mamuwalde has to go to to be an accurate representation of the type.

Dr. Thomas throughout the movie was representative of the uncle tom type. The uncle tom type is known for an unwavering loyalty to his white family (whoever that might be), no real initiative to change his role in the status quo, and an aggressiveness towards other African Americans. The first time Dr. Thomas is on screen is when he, Michelle, and Tina are visiting the funeral parlor to grieve Billy’s death. After Tina and Michelle leave, Dr. Thomas inspects the body, much to the black parlor manager’s dismay. After flashing his badge and the fact that he is with the “Scientific Investigation Division”, Dr. Thomas becomes preoccupied with the body, only asking the manager questions that would further his investigation in a rude manner (Crain 20:23-22:20). This scene can be interpreted to show Dr. Thomas’s hostility towards other African Americans, as characterized by the Uncle Tom type. Later, Dr. Thomas gets a call from Lieutenant Peters, who tells him that he could not get the permit Dr. Thomas asked for. Dr. Thomas is visibly upset, but, in line with the uncle tom type, does not say anything that would 1) get Lieutenant Peters aggressively upset, even going back to say “yeah” in a more polite tone, or 2) indicate that he would take action to do what he wanted anyways (Crain 47:32-47:50).

Nancy the photographer had a relatively minor role in the film, but from the time she was on screen, one can make an argument that she was portraying the jezebel character type. Jezebels are known for their promiscuity, revealing clothing, and sexual hunger. Nancy’s outfit fits the bill of revealing clothing quite easily, as she’s wearing a nearly shoulderless one piece that cuts off very high along the legs. Starting from when she photographs Mamuwalde and Tina at the club, she remarks “I think romance is in the air”, and flirts with Skillet, saying “ I know what would develop with you in a darkroom. And it wouldn’t be more pictures” (Crain 41:54-42:30). This quite clearly shows a promiscuity reminiscent of the jezebel type.

In addition, after being turned into a vampire by Mamuwalde, Nancy stumbles outside her house while a cop is on patrol. Still wearing her outfit from the club, she collapses on her porch, catching the attention of the officer. The officer, in full uniform, runs over to a Nancy too distraught to answer any questions, only mumbling “help me” and “help me please”. The officer picks her up into a bridal carry, intending to take her back inside, but then Nancy reveals that she’s actually fine and bites the officer on the neck (Crain 45:29-46:05). Because the vampire bite is an inherently sexual act, as covered in module 1, this bite can be seen to represent Nancy’s sexual hunger, as described by the jezebel type.

Dracula makes a statement about the plight of the urban poor by showing that they are overrepresented by African Americans. In almost all public spaces shown in the film with extras, they are predominantly African American. Specifically, the various scenes that take place at the club (Crain 34:46, 1:02:41), and the warehouse where the investigators are jumped come to mind (Crain 1:13:28). Especially when looking at the scene in the warehouse, conditions can be described as rundown, dusty, industrial, and in general not a place anyone would want to live. However, the urban poor (i.e. vampires) have settled in, making this warehouse their home. In addition, the cheap, thrown together nature of their clothes and primitive behaviors they exhibit, when taken as a representation of all urban poor, paints a bleak picture of the kind of life this demographic has to live through for the audience. Touching on the club scene, the entire establishment has vices everywhere. Tables have bowls of cigarettes on them , everyone’s drinking, and sex seems to be on people’s minds (at least Skillet’s and Nancy’s) (Crain 35:07, 42:06). Again, taking the club patrons to be representative of the whole, one can argue that the urban poor are disproportionately affected by these vices, as they normalize them as much as they do.

Finally, comparing Dracula from 1931 to Blacula from 1972, a case can be made that, although both were rapists, Blacula was largely concerned with protecting his identity as a means to be with Tina, who he was shown to have remained faithful and loyal to, whereas Dracula was unconcerned with his three wives, and only wanted to go out and infect as many young Englishwomen as possible. This difference makes Blacula a more sympathetic villain, and his death scene leaves audiences with many more mixed emotions than Dracula’s death.

2)

To conclude, the underlying message of these representations is a very tongue-in-cheek criticism of the African American character types popularized by Hollywood before the era of blaxploitation films. For the most part, Blacula does a great job showing that, while African American characters can show characteristics of a type, they can be much more complex than a simple stereotype. After all, Blacula was not just going around looking for white women to rape and Dr. Thomas had enough initiative and agency to take matters into his own hands. From the limited amount of screentime whites get in the movie, I think one of the statements *Blacula* makes about whites is calling out the unfairness of racially targeted negative stereotypes of characters that they helped popularize. In particular, Sam from the morgue’s inability to listen to Dr. Thomas’s instructions leading to his death and Lieutenant Peters becoming something of a mindless sidekick to Dr. Thomas during the chemical plant scenes comes to mind.

Bibliography

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