

Dracula and the Mediaparadox¹¹

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Abstract

In the Dracula research it is almost a cliché to say that in Bram Stoker's novel media considered modern in the 1890s (phonograph, typewriter, telegraph, etc.) are effective weapons in the hands of the vampire hunters against the bloodsucker count. While contemporary vampire movies frequently share this point of view, they often represent the relationship between vampires and modern media in a paradox way. In my study I analyse how contemporary vampire movies come into this discussion: how they transmit and rethink Stoker's heritage. In the first part of my study I briefly overview this legacy. This is followed by the analysis of two contemporary vampire films: first *What We Do in the Shadows* (2014) and then *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000). *What We Do in the Shadows* deals with the relationship of the vampires and the media on the level of the story while *Shadow of the Vampire* approaches the question on a meta-level. However, they represent the relationship between vampires and modern media in a similar way: on the one hand they depict vampires as atavistic, primitive creatures who can hardly use modern media; on the other hand they show the vampire-like face of these media. At the end of my study I turn the experiences of the film analyses back to Stoker's novel, to show that this paradox can also be found in his writing.

Keywords: Dracula, Bram Stoker, vampire, medium, contemporary vampire movies, *What We Do in the Shadows*, *Shadow of the Vampire*

In the middle of the 1990s Nina Auerbach was certainly right when concluding that while “we all know Dracula, or think we do [...], there are many Draculas” (Auerbach 1995, 1). In the last twenty years the validity of this statement has been further strengthened by contemporary vampire films, novels and short stories: we can find numerous manifestations of Bram Stoker's bloodsucker Count in these works. But there is no doubt either that the many faces of Dracula

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have a lot of common features. In my study I analyse one of these features, that is, the disgust that Dracula feels toward modern media. In the first part I briefly overview how Stoker's novel represents the relationship between Dracula and the media. This is followed by the analysis of two contemporary vampire films: *What We Do in the Shadows* (Jemaine Clement & Taika Waititi 2014) and the *Shadow of the Vampire* (E. Elias Merhige 2000). *What We Do in the Shadows* deals with the relationship between vampires and the media on the level of the story while *Shadow of the Vampire* approaches the question on a meta-level. At the end I turn the experiences of the film analyses back to Stoker's novel, to show that this paradox can also be found in his writing.

In the age of Stoker the topics of technology and science were already closely related to the narrower interpretation of media (in this approach the notion of media involves telegraph, diary, newspaper, among others). This relationship is not only due to the fact that the new media were the results of scientific discoveries and technological inventions, but also to the habit to consider broadly-defined media attributes as media. Marshall McLuhan's broadly-defined media notion could provide a conceptual framework for this approach, allowing to represent these phenomena not separately but together (McLuhan 1994, 3–21). For instance when McLuhan writes about the speedup of exchange and information he does not distinguish the writing from the money or the wheel (McLuhan, 1994, 24). Further on I use the notion of media in this broader sense, in order to be able to put together instruments like the cinematographic apparatus, the printed book and the coach.

1. Bram Stoker's Dracula and the media

Most of the Dracula research concerning the relationship between the vampire and media agree that in Stoker's novel new media have a crucial role in the fight against the bloodsucker count (Byron 1998a; Punter 2007; Kittler 1997; Stiles 2006; Wicke 1992; Fleissner 2000; Pedlar 2003). Vampire hunters can triumph over the vampire, because they are familiar with the modern media and they take advantage of them – while Dracula insists on his well accustomed media. When the vampire hunters make a list about things which distinguish them from the vampire they emphasise that they “have resources of science”. (Stoker 277)

This triumph is seen most clearly in the difference between the preferred vehicles used by the vampire and the hunters. Dracula relies on the conventional forms of travelling: when he is on a long journey he uses carriage and calèche on land and sailboat on sea (from Varna to England he travels on a schooner called Demeter; on the return journey he flees on a sailing ship called Czarina Catherine). By contrast, the hunters prefer steam-driven transports, they like travelling by train and steamship (during the chase from Paris to Varna they use the Orient Express; from Varna they hotfoot after Dracula on a steamboat).

Moreover, they do not just use the modern forms of travelling but also emphasise their superiority – even if this is not claimed in an explicit way: when the hunters discuss the circumstances of the chase, Professor Van Helsing says: “To sail a ship takes time, go she never so quick; and when we start we go on land [by train] more quick”. (Stoker 359) While it seems that Van Helsing contrasts the means of transport by land and by sea, actually he classifies sailing as a slow form of travelling. Later Jonathan Harker, while travelling on a steamboat happily notes in his diary that they “overhauled every boat, big and little.” (Stoker 399)

It is worth noting that the Count seems atavistic not only because he prefers old forms of travelling, but also because he speaks about them in an archaic mode. In his first letter addressed to Jonathan Harker he assures the young clerk that “on the diligence from Bukovina there is a place kept for him.” (Stoker 34). Later the Count uses the very same word, when he says farewell to Jonathan: “When the [Szgany and the Slovaks] gone, my carriage shall come for you, and shall bear you to the Borgo Pass to meet the diligence from Bukovina to Bistritz.” (Stoker 81) It is not surprising that in our days “diligence” has an archaic impression – but it seems that the western characters of the novel were not familiar with it either. Jonathan on his journey to the vampire’s castle consistently uses “carriage” (Stoker 33, 41) and “coach” (Stoker 34, 35, 36, etc.) instead of “diligence” – just like the vampire hunters do throughout the novel. The only hunter who uses the term “diligence” is Professor Van Helsing, but it does not mitigate the archaic sound of the term. Firstly because the professor is not a native English speaker and he regularly uses archaic expressions. Secondly, because he uses the term “diligence” when he recalls the journey of Jonathan Harker which he knows from the journal of the clerk – so it is likely that he borrows the expression from Dracula himself, because he read the Count’s letter in Jonathan’s journal.

However, the contrast of the old-fashioned Count and the up-to-date hunters is not only represented by the vehicles but also by other technologies they use. As Glennis Byron points out, in the novel “[w]ithout the telegraph, the typewriter, the phonograph, the railway, the newspaper, the necessary information could never have been collected, collated, transmitted.” (Byron 1998a, 22) Elsewhere he states that:

[f]rom telegraphs, typewriters, and telephones, to shorthand, phonographs, and kodaks, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* flaunts its modernity: it is concretely embedded in the ever-growing late Victorian world of information technology. [...] Newspaper cuttings, telegraphs, ship’s logs, journal entries, letters, interviews all come together in the typescript Mina produces in triplicate. Even Dracula is aware of the need to collect data and avidly seeks the power it confers. (Byron 1998b, 12)

David Punter goes further along this line: the “element of progress stands in stark contrast to the figure of Dracula himself, who signifies a clinging to older roots of power”, to conclude that “the novel ends by demonstrating the superiority of modern technology over older ways of life” (Punter 2007, 36).

Indeed, the media which transmit information and the recording techniques have a crucial role in the fight against the vampire. Jonathan Harker writes his journal entries and his letters to Mina in shorthand: this actually saves his life because when Dracula lays his hands on one of the letters he cannot decode the strange signs, therefore he cannot unravel the young clerk’s plan – if he could, he would probably kill him.

However, it seems that in the novel it is even more important to collect, sort out and multiply information than to encrypt it (Richards 1993, 5). We must not forget that until Mina Harker collects and copies the diaries, journals and letters, only the reader has the special position to know all the elements of the story – the Western characters are in darkness, they cannot see the relation between cause and effect. The hunters get a comprehensive view on their situation only when they receive and read the copies made by Mina. The metaphorical statement of Professor Van Helsing clearly shows how threatening these copies are for Dracula: after reading them, the Professor declares that “This paper is as sunshine.” (Stoker 221) On one hand

this sentence obviously indicates how illuminating the diary is, as it throws new light upon the events. On the other hand it connects the paper to a dangerous element (sunshine), which can restrict the freedom of the Count.

In what follows, I analyse how contemporary vampire movies transmit and rethink Stoker's heritage, the media-alienation of the vampire. The subjects of my essay are two horror movies: *What We Do in the Shadows* and the *Shadow of the Vampire*.

2. Bloodsuckers and media in contemporary vampire movies

2.1. *What We Do in the Shadows*

What We Do in the Shadows tells the story of four immortal bloodsuckers (Vladislav, Viago, Deacon and Petyr) who live in Wellington, New Zealand. Their house is not so far from the little city and they successfully keep their real identity in secret from the citizens until a film crew decides to make a documentary about them. The crew equips themselves with crucifixes and follow the vampires everywhere.

Regarding the relationship between vampirism and media, the most important character of the movie is Vladislav. The movie uses an intriguing solution when drawing his character: his personality strongly recalls both the historical and the fictional Dracula, although some of his features conspicuously do not fit in this parallel. His name invokes Vlad Țepeș, a Voivod of Wallachia in the 15th century; his appearance also resembles that of Vlad: long dark hair, peculiar moustache and goatee [Figs.1–2.].



[Figs. 1–2.] Vladislav and Vlad Țepeș

His story is similar to that of Vlad Țepeș: both of them were cruel tyrants, gained their reputation from torturing peoples with all kinds of peaked things (such as wooden stakes). Vladislav's nickname, "Poker" also associates to Vlad's nickname, "Țepeș", which in Romanian language means "the Impaler". Vladislav does not follow only Vlad, but also Stoker's Dracula – for example the three vampire lovers (who obviously do not appear in the legend of Vlad Țepeș). However, the birthday of Vladislav does not fit in neither timeframe: he is 862 years old, which means that contrary to the historical Dracula, Vladislav was born in the 12th century not in the 15th. With this and the other little differences the movie tries to give the impression that it is the only authentic source of the story of Vlad and the vampires generally, that we can get a full picture of these monsters only from this movie.

Not surprisingly, the atavistic element from Vlad's characterisation could not be missed in the film: he is quite old-fashioned, as his friend, Viago, says: "He has some pretty old ideas." This also determines his relationship with modern media. One night he wants to show his hypnotic power to the cameraman. He peeps into flats through the windows to find a suitable subject for his demonstration [Figs. 3–4.]. His first potential victim sits with her back to the window watching television. Vlad whispers through the closed window, "Look at me!", but his effort is useless. He gives a ridiculous explanation to his failure: "She cannot see me from that angle." The second time his victim is an old man who is busy with searching something on his laptop [Figs. 5–6.]. He does not respond to the calling of Vladislav either, but when the vampire softly knocks on the window he turns his head toward him.





[Figs.3–6.] *What We Do in the Shadows*

From our perspective the most important element in these two failed hypnotic experiments is that Vladislav's potential victims were engaged with modern media (a television and a laptop). This can be interpreted as if these media blocked the hypnotic power of the vampire, as if they protected the users, made them immune against the ability of Vladislav. In this respect, *What We Do in the Shadows* follows the traces of the novel: although the circumstances and the media are different, the principle is common: modern media always triumph over vampires.

It cannot be a coincidence that shortly after this episode the vampires make acquaintance with Stu, an IT specialist, and start to learn about modern media, programs, applications (such as mobile phone, laptop, digital camera, internet, Skype). While on the surface this learning process is very funny, actually it raises a serious issue: the vampires are aware of the threat that media pose, so they try to remove the obstacle between them and their prey – the humans. Therefore their goal is not only to make some funny pictures of Vladislav or to speak with the old servant of Vigo through Skype but also to reclaim their power over humans by the knowledge of modern media.

However, we should not forget that the primary function of television is to watch movies – and laptops are also suitable for this. This basic observation leads us to a paradox in the relationship between Dracula and modern media: in the diegetic world of the movie, instruments used/suited for watching movies (as media) block the vampire's power but the viewer gets this information from a vampire movie. Therefore television and laptop have a two-faced power: they protect humans from vampires but they also help vampires to live on. From a sceptical media theoretical point of view, this protecting ability of modern media can be addressed differently: Vladislav's failure can be interpreted in another way. He could not hypnotise his potential

victims because modern media have done it already – the television and the laptop have mesmerised the viewers already.

Consequently *What We Do in the Shadows* emphasises the vampire-like aspect of modern media – the movie confers television and laptop an ability (the hypnotising power) which in vampire narratives is originally attached to bloodsuckers. The *Shadow of the Vampire* provides a deeper insight into this topic.

2.2. *Shadow of the Vampire*

The *Shadow of the Vampire* displays the fictional story of making Nosferatu (*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*, F. W. Murnau 1922). What makes it really special is that in it director Murnau asks a real vampire to play Count Orlok. The film sets in the 1920s, in an era when cinema still has to earn its place among other arts. At the beginning of the film, Greta Schröder, a famous actress notes that she would rather play in theatres than in films. She highlights the difference between the two arts with a metaphor: “A theatrical audience gives me life, while this thing [the camera] merely takes it from me.” With this metaphor the film parallels the camera and the vampire at the very beginning of the story. This parallel is interesting in two respects: firstly because in the 2000s the *Shadow of the Vampire* rightly represents film as a medium which tries to get power over everybody and become immortal; secondly the movie suggests that this process started in the 1920s when the film became the most vampire-like medium. From this perspective it is also significant that during the movie several characters use drugs – by injection (see Aikens 2009). Here I have no room to elaborate on the relation between drugs and vampires, I would like only to point out how the movie juxtaposes these three elements: the vampire, the drug and the camera. It suggests that films are similar to drugs and vampirism: all three are represented as an ever-growing addiction. (In the fictional world of the movie – 1921 – we only have to wait three years for Béla Balázs’s uncanny statement: “the cinema [...] is no educational establishment! It is a simple stimulant, like alcohol.” (Balázs 2010 [1924], 7)

Following on the parallel between vampires and media we have to focus our attention on two other scenes of the movie. Firstly, the business between Hutter, a young clerk and Count

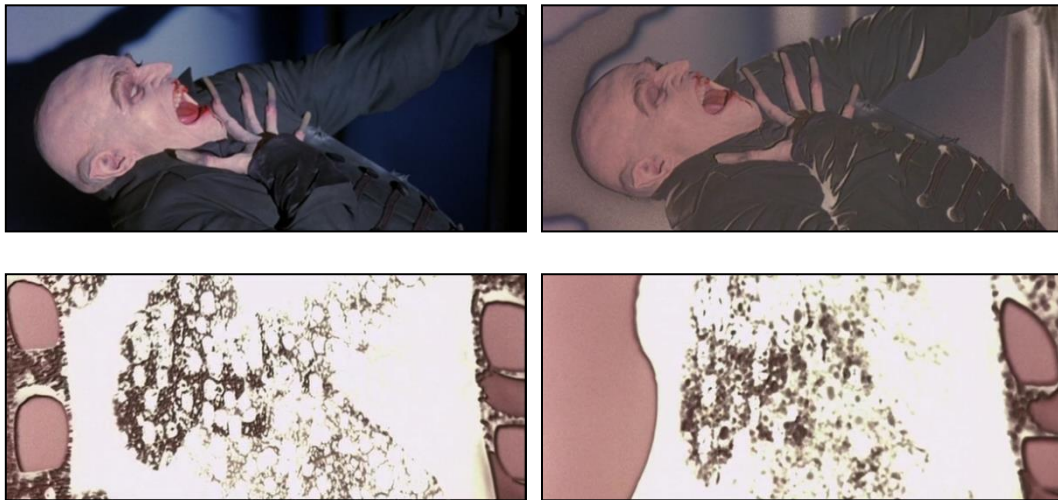
Orlok. The actors are sitting at a table. The Count is busy with some papers, Hutter is taking out new documents from his bag and accidentally drops a medallion on the table which – according to the scenario of *Nosferatu* – shows a picture of his wife. When Count Orlok glimpses at the picture he makes the following comment: “She has a beautiful bosom.” This statement astonishes Murnau and the scriptwriter and makes them angry (however, they do not stop shooting!). At first sight their reaction is very reasonable because the vampire’s comment is not compatible with the motivation of his character. Seemingly he ruins the scene. But we must not forget that this happens in the shooting of a silent movie, not a talkie. That is why it is irrelevant what Count Orlok says – nobody hears it. Furthermore, if the filmmakers add suitable subtitles to this scene during the cutting process, they can fill this instinctive exclamation with new meaning. From the first film theorists we know that silent movie actors often said irrelevant sentences during the shooting – it never was a problem. Béla Balázs writes in *The Visible Man* that sometimes “excellent film actors produce the most ridiculous nonsense as fill-in text on set. Watching the same sequence on film, on the other hand, may be deeply moving experience.” (Balázs 2010 [1924], 25) Boris Eichenbaum writes the following:

it is incorrect to call cinema a »silent« art: it is not a question of »silence«, but of the lack of the *audible* word [...]. The theatrical relationship, in which mimicry and gesture accompany the word, is abolished, but the word as articulatory mimicry preserves its force. The film actor speaks during the shooting of the film, and this has its effect on the screen. There was a well-known incident in an English cinema when a group of deaf-and-dumb people were at a film-show and protested against the content of the sentences spoken by the actors, which had no correspondence at all to the scenes depicted on the screen. (Eichenbaum 1982, 13)

Therefore, in the transaction scene the vampire is the only one who acts “suitably”. The movie represents him as someone who is completely alien to the shooting, who is awkward in front of the cameras but actually he fits in this context more naturally than anyone else. As a result, the movie opposes the director and the vampire in its world: seemingly the former has power over the film, the camera obeys him but it is actually the vampire who fits organically in the film.

The last scenes of the movie confirm this impression, too. In this part Murnau plans to shoot the death of the vampire. He makes a trap for the bloodsucker: in order to destroy the vampire he plans to let the sunlight into the place of the last scenes. Thus he could shoot the real death of the monster, not only a feigned one. Although the vampire figures out Murnau's plan and puts the purchase out of action, with the help of the locals the director could destroy the monster.

It is a cliché of the vampire narratives that vampires can be destroyed by the sunlight – however, the *Shadow of the Vampire* represents it in a different way. In most of the vampire movies the sunlight burns the bloodsuckers, only smoke and dust remain after them; in the *Shadow of the Vampire*, Count Orlok first changes his colour, his skin blisters, his body becomes fluid and finally he vanishes [Figs.7–10.].



[Figs.7–10.]. *Shadow of the Vampire*

This sequence closely resembles the destruction of a celluloid film strip. In the world of the movie the strip used during the shooting is a photosensitive material and it is very flammable. Just like the vampire. As if the movie suggested again that films and vampires are similar. Furthermore, in the movie the vampire often refers to his ambivalent relation to light. When the scriptwriter asks him, “What is it that inspires the most longing in you? That is most desirable and yet unattainable?”, the vampire answers: “The light... of the sun.” Orlok craves for sunlight

but he cannot have it – the picture strip also needs light to record images but too much light destroys it.

The *What We Do in the Shadows* and the *Shadow of the Vampire* carry Stoker's concept to a further stage. Media and media-techniques can help to defeat the bloodsuckers, however – paradoxically – they guarantee the survival of these monsters; they help them to live on. These movies – in a reflexive way – represent the camera and the projector as the strongest enemies and also as the most reliable abettors of the vampires.

As mentioned before and as Friedrich Kittler remarks in his essay *Dracula's Legacy* (Kittler 1997, 83), in Stoker's novel we can find almost every medium that counted as modern in the 1890s, except film. *Dracula* was published in 1897, its story takes place sometime in the 1890s so Stoker should have known and his characters could have known about cinema. But do cinema and film really miss from the novel? Is there any sign of this medium in *Dracula*?

3. Optical media in *Dracula*

At the end of the first chapter, *Dracula* – disguised – carries Harker to his castle. At first sight it is a quite marginal episode but it is important from the perspective of the relation between film and vampire:

Suddenly, away on our left I saw a faint flickering blue flame. The driver saw it at the same moment. He at once checked the horses, and, jumping to the ground, disappeared into the darkness. [...] [Then] the driver suddenly appeared again, and without a word took his seat, and we resumed our journey.

I think I must have fallen asleep and kept dreaming of the incident, for it seemed to be repeated endlessly [...].

Once the flame appeared so near the road, that even in the darkness around us I could watch the driver's motions. He went rapidly to where the blue flame arose, it must have been very faint, for it did not seem to illumine the place around it at all, and gathering a few stones, formed them into some device.

Once there appeared a strange optical effect. When he stood between me and the flame he did not obstruct it, for I could see its ghostly flicker all the same. This startled me, but as the effect was only momentary, I took it that my eyes deceived me straining through the darkness. (Stoker 43)

At this point of the narrative the “strange optical effect” raises some fundamental questions: Does Harker really falls asleep and dreams the whole adventure? Or does the adventure really happen and his eyes deceive him? Or is it a “marvelous episode” (Todorov 1973: 41–57) And in this last case, which element of the episode is magical: the fire or the body of the Count? This remains an open question in the novel, however other episodes suggest that the answer lies in the incorporeal body of Dracula.

In the log of the Demeter we find a strange encounter between Dracula and one of the mates. The latter says the following to his captain: “On the watch last night I saw It, like a man, tall and thin, and ghastly pale. It was in the bows, and looking out. I crept behind It, and gave it my knife, but the knife went through It, empty as the air.” (Stoker 119) In this interpretation Dracula’s incorporeal body is responsible for the strange optical effect. This means that the function of the “ghostly flicker” episode is precisely to draw our attention to the vampire’s special feature, to his incorporeal body. Dracula’s body is located in the dark between a small light source and a viewer (Harker). The light makes this snapshot interesting; but it gives meaning to Dracula’s body. Without this transmitter (this medium) the “strange optical effect” would not be complete. It is worth noting, that other parts of the novel also strengthen this interpretation, and represent Dracula as a “strange optical effect” caused by light. In chapter 8, Mina and Lucy admire the landscape when the latter falls in some kind of unconscious condition. Mina writes the following in her diary:

I said nothing, but followed her eyes. She appeared to be looking over at our own seat, whereon was a dark figure seated alone. I was quite a little startled myself, for it seemed for an instant as if the stranger had great eyes like burning flames, but a second look dispelled the illusion. The red sunlight was shining on the windows of St. Mary’s Church behind our seat, and as the sun dipped there was just sufficient

change in the refraction and reflection to make it appear as if the light moved. I called Lucy's attention to the peculiar effect. (Stoker 129)

Although here nobody mentions that Dracula has a phantomatic body, this section closely resembles the "ghostly flicker" episode. The vampire is located between the viewers and the reflective device (the window): the sun lights the window but – in Mina's explanation – it has an effect on Dracula's appearance as well.

If we accept that in the novel the absence of cinema and film is a sign, then we can consider the above mentioned episodes as concretisation and emphasis of the paradox between vampires and media. In the novel different media help to destroy Dracula: but we know that the ultimate defeat of the bloodsucker is an illusion, he lives on – precisely with the help of media. And from the end of the 19th century cinema proved to be the best ally of vampires.

According to the above mentioned parts of the novel and the analysed scenes of the *Shadow of the Vampire*, film is the most vampire-like medium. However the novel also represents another vampire-medium – the manuscript. In his famous essay, *The Flight of the Vampire*, Michel Tournier writes the following about the relation between texts and vampires, reading and bloodsucking: When "[t]he writer [...] publishes a book, he releases into the anonymous crowd of men and women a flock of paper birds, parched, bloodthirsty vampires." As soon as the book finds a reader, it becomes fully functional from the imaginations of the reader – but it always has to search for new readers to survive (Tournier 1987, 6).

In the world of *Dracula* manuscripts help the hunters to defeat the vampire; but in our world manuscripts (and the book itself) help the Count to live on – the novel has never been out of print.

However – as Tournier points out – the book, the novel not only helps the vampire to live on, but it also becomes a vampire itself. A vampire lives a much longer life than mortals, but he needs blood for this; the novel had also survived many generations, but it constantly needed readers to achieve this.

4. Conclusion

While *Dracula* adaptations (such as *Dracula* [1931, Tod Browning], *Horror of Dracula* [Terence Fisher, 1958], *Dracula* [1992, Francis Ford Coppola]) and *Dracula* sequels (such as *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* [Terence Fisher, 1966], *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave* [Freddie Francis, 1968]) are mainly occupied with drawing – and reinterpreting – the plot and the characters' features, contemporary vampire movies focus on metaphors, symbols and narrative techniques of the novel. In my essay I analysed two of these movies, *Shadow of the Vampire* and *What We Do in the Shadows* but my research has a broader scope and involved movies like *Therapy for a Vampire* (*Der Vampir auf der Couch*, 2014), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) etc.

The main point of my study was the relationship between media and *Dracula*. As we saw in the novel – on the story level – modern media such as phonograph, telegraph, and typewriter help the vampire hunters to achieve their Holy Mission to destroy *Dracula*. *Shadow of the Vampire* and *What We do in the Shadows* carry on this concept: in their diegetic world modern media (like the laptop and the television) seem to provide protection against vampires. However on a meta-level they emphasise the very opposite of this: media are always on the vampire's side, they help them (and their myth) to live on.

Shadow of the Vampire puts cinema, the apparatus in focus. In *What We Do in the Shadows* television and laptop (technical equipments suitable to watch movies) are central metaphors. Moving picture projection is seemingly missing from the novel, but certain parts of the text suggest that a relationship can be established between *Dracula* and optical illusion caused by light, recalling a basic cinematic mechanism. From this point of view the novel advances the relation represented in contemporary vampire movies, the close connection between vampires and equipments suitable to watch movies. Meanwhile the novel points out another medium which is able to defeat *Dracula*, but at the same time it helps him to live on – the typewritten, multiple piles of paper.

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