

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 18. 11. 2024

The Vampire of Ferato

Juraj Herz has been always fascinated by horror films. He utilised horror techniques even when adapting psychological novels (*Oil Lamps* [Petrolejšové lampy, 1971]) and filming fairy tales (*The Ninth Heart* [Deváté srdce, 1978], *The Virgin and the Monster* [Panna a netvor, 1978]). But only two of his films entered cinemas as „horrors“ – *Darkness* (T.M.A.) from 2009 and *The Vampire of Ferato* from 1981. Although the name and characters (Mima, Luisa) of the latter allude to one of the founding films of the horror genre, *Nosferatu*, and by extension to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, it proves rather difficult to categorize.

Herz ironizes the tropes of vampire film and – just like in his earlier title *The Cremator* (Spalovač mrtvol, 1968) – balances terror with dark and grotesque humour. In the end, the film is more convincing as a satire about the dependant relationship between a man and a machine than as a scary story about a car fuelled by human blood. Perhaps because most horror scenes were crossed out of the script and the rest wasn't approved by the censorship committee. Or perhaps it was the intention from the very beginning.

„It's a film about a meaningless passion for cars, about the relations between drivers and pedestrians and drivers and other drivers, and about idolising a means of transport,“ specified Herz in an interview for *Kino* magazine.^[1] The motif of the unhealthy fixation on pleasure derived from high speed appeared in the original prototype of the film script, the short story *Upír Ltd.* (Vampire, Ltd.) by Josef Nesvadba. It was first published in 1962 in an anthology titled *Výprava opačným směrem* (The Quest in the Opposite Direction) and then later as *Upír po dvaceti letech* (A vampire after 20 years) in 1975.

In the early 1980s, when Herz concluded that Barrandov could approve a horror film, he chose Nesvadba's work. The story was adapted into a literary script by Jan

Fleischer with one important deviation from the original. While Nesvadba's story clearly states that the car is fuelled by human blood, the script remains ambiguous to the very end and is open to supernatural and realistic interpretations.

The film's protagonist is Doctor Marek, whom Jiří Menzel portrayed as clueless and vulnerable. He therefore easily falls victim to women and conspiracies. His colleague Mima Veberová (Dagmar Havlová), an ambulance driver and fast cars enthusiast, is mesmerised by a mysterious foreign company named Ferat and their latest car which, when driven, seems to cause ecstatic states. And anaemia.

After meeting an old friend, coach Kříž (Petr Čepek), Mima becomes a Rallye driver. In the meantime, Marek turns into a detective investigating the mystery of the vampire car and Ferat's abusive practices. But he is seduced by the mysterious Klára (Jana Břežková) who bears an uncanny resemblance to dead race car driver Luisa (Jana Břežková). ^[2] She claims they were twins.

The horror atmosphere of the stylised film enhanced by DoP Richard Valenta's hand-held camera and deliberately non-melodic synthesiser music by Petr Hapka, unfortunately gradually weakens due to introducing new motifs and mixing various genre methods. But as far as its plot and visual style, the film is so attractive and abundant in curious ideas (including the director's cameo as a vampire in an old black-and-white horror film watched by the film's protagonist) that it's easy to understand why it became so popular with fans of horror films. It also enjoyed widespread popularity in West Germany. Television channel ZDF screened it as *Der Autovampir* already in March 1985.

In a classical horror, the monster would probably be black and red race car. But Herz along with designer Theodor Pištěk chose an existing model from the Škoda Car Museum in Mladá Boleslav and modified it. Closest to their vision was the sport coupé Škoda Supersport 724 with a fibreglass bodywork and the engine from the Škoda 110 L Rallye. The car with six hidden headlamps and a flip-up windscreen was introduced at the 1972 Brussels Motor Show but never made it to serial production. After painting it black and adding a spoiler nine years later, it at least starred in a film.

For a nightmare scene when the protagonist looks under the bonnet and is nearly devoured by the car, Herz approached his talented colleague Jan Švankmajer. Due to

limited options for his own work, Švankmajer back then made some extra money as a special effects artist and designer at Barrandov (e.g. *Adela Has Not Had Supper Yet* [Adéla ještě nevečeřela, 1978] and *The Mystery of the Carpathian Castle*, [Tajemství hradu v Karpatech, 1981]). At a Prague slaughterhouse, he got a heart, liver, stomach and carotid arteries which reminded him most of engine piping. Everything was fuelled by blood the car sucked out of the driver's foot through the gas pedal. Thanks to a resourceful mechanical system, the innards moved as they were truly alive.

In the final cut, massacred by the censors^[3], we can only see a fraction of what Švankmajer's mind spawned and what would definitely bear comparison with revolting hybrids of biological organism and machines seen in foreign body horrors such as *Videodrome*, *Tetsuo* and *Titane*. The non-traditional car, a symbol of the physical and psychical connection of a man a machine, was used in the film's promo campaign. For six weeks, it was displayed in the shop window of the Družba department store at the Wenceslas Square in Prague. Naturally without the animal organs.

But it wouldn't be accurate to see the bloodthirsty car as the film's main villain. That was the car maker Ferat which used illicit methods to silence their critics and concealed the risks associated with driving their cars. Business was evidently more important than the drivers' health. After all, Theodor Pištěk's opening credits invite the viewers to see the film as a laconic criticism of consumerism and by extension lifestyle based on speed and racing. The sequence combines footage from the world of car racing with the Marlboro logo, an emblem of Western lifestyle.

On one hand, the drivers are obsessed with machinery which enslaves them and perhaps literally sucks the blood out of them, on the other hand, they remain indifferent to human life. Already in the opening scene, Marek encounters a total lack of interest from other drivers when he begs them for help at a scene of a car accident. Later, he witnesses a death of woman who doesn't manage to cross a road in the given time. Marek himself is then almost crushed to death in his own car when massive lorries drive at him from both sides. He gets no help from the onlookers and someone even tries to stop him from getting out of the car.

While we may have some objections to the film's pace and the inconsistent usage of horror film tropes, *The Vampire of Ferato* still remains a prophetic portrayal of a

society whose priorities are set by a motoring culture. The main source of confidence and even the feeling of superiority over ordinary pedestrians and cyclist is the fetishised engine which gradually strips people of their humanity until its revving becomes more natural than using one's heart and brain.

The Vampire of Ferato (Upír z Feratu, Czechoslovakia, 1981), director: Juraj Herz, script: Jan Fleischer, cinematography: Richard Valenta, editing: Jaromír Janáček, music: Petr Hapka, cast: Jiří Menzel, Dagmar Havlová, Jana Břežková, Petr Čepek, Jan Schmid, Zdenka Procházková, Blanka Waleská, Zdeněk Ornest, Ilja Racek, Vít Olmer et al. Barrandov Film Studios, 86 min.

Literature:

Alena Bechtoldová, Svazují mě slova. Jana Břežková. *Záběr: časopis filmového diváka* 15, 1982, no. 9 (30th April), p. 8.

Juraj Herz, *Autopsie (pitva režiséra)*. Praha: Mladá fronta 2015.

Olga Hrivňáková, Upír z Feratu, *Kino 37*, 1982, no. 3 (9th February), p. 7.

Štěpán Hulík, *Kinematografie zapomnění. Počátky normalizace ve Filmovém studiu Barrandov (1968–1973)*. Praha: Academia 2011.

Theodor Pištěk, *Člověk a stroj*. Praha: KANT 2017.

Notes:

[1] Olga Hrivňáková, Upír z Feratu. *Kino 37*, 1982, no. 3 (9th February), p. 7.

[2] According to Herz, Jana Břežková from the Činoherní klub didn't have a driving license so the scenes had to be filmed with a stunt double. The actress herself said in one interview that the whole crew was afraid that the car would be damaged and the production stopped.

[3] One of the scenes that had to be shortened was for instance the sex scenes between Marek and Lukášová when their bodies are covered with blood.