DraculAI

Radu Jude's *Dracula* (2025)

It is often claimed that Bram Stoker's late-Victorian Gothic novel *Dracula* was inspired by legends around Vlad the Impaler, a 15th-century ruler of Wallachia, a region bordering Transylvania. Vlad certainly did not lack horridness. He became known as "the Impaler" for his treatment of enemies and called himself "Vlad Dracula," or "Son of the Dragon," alluding to his father's membership in a chivalric order. More recent scholarship suggests that Stoker likely found the name Dracula in Whitby's Public Library while on holiday, selecting it simply because he believed it meant "devil" in Romanian. Regardless of whether Stoker plucked "Dracula" from a library note or not, the name and the figure were shaped again and again by how others looked at Dracula. In fact, in Stoker's novel, Dracula himself has no inner voice. His story unfolds through letters, diaries, and telegrams and is assembled from the perceptions of others.

This mediated representation of the count also makes up the larger chunk of his post-literary existence, especially in movies, where he survives as a pop artifact, open to parody and remix. It may be a matter of meta-literary irony that Dracula's eternal curse, more than his thirst for blood, resides in the fact that he never possesses an identity of his own. Not least for this misdeed of *othering*, some took pity on the count and humanized him. Already in Lambert Hillyer's *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) the story centers on Countess Zaleska, the daughter of Dracula, who struggles with her own vampirism as she attempts to destroy her father's body and free herself from the inherited curse. In Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), the monster becomes a fallen lover, a tragic hero who experiences immortality as perpetual loss.

Radu Jude's 2025 rendering of Dracula clearly follows the tradition of mediated representation. The nearly three-hours mashup is a satirical trip through legend, politics, pop culture, and technology. It follows a filmmaker in Transylvania stuck with writer's block who uses generative AI to propose wildly different Dracula ideas: a workplace satire, an erotic cabaret, cartoons, socialist-era propaganda, and TikTok videos. Through 14 chapters, the film treats vampirism as if answering the generative AI prompt, "Hey ChatGPT, what are the different representations of Dracula?" However, the film's formal experiments, what Alvin Toffler called "information

overload," ultimately also serve as commentary. Dracula becomes a metaphor for being sucked into an endless algorithm. Not unlike Stoker's unseen count, the platforms that run our feeds seize on human experience as raw material, draining it into predictions and habits that let them feed again. In short, Radu Jude's film reframes the Dracula myth as a critique of attention extraction in the age of artificial intelligence, using a form that mimics an algorithmic data dump. In Jude's own words, "the film itself is Dracula."[1]

Jude's Dracula as a Meta-Textual Database

Each chapter in Jude's *Dracula* plays out like a prompt and its response: Dracula reimagined in a new genre or format. One segment poses "Dracula on social media," and spits out a TikTok-style skit of the count as an internet influencer; another asks for a Broadway musical, resulting in an erotic cabaret number with vampires; yet another tries a workplace comedy. At one point the film repurposes footage from F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* as a spoof advertisement for penis enlargements. Besides visual references, the "training data" are academic texts and historical references. Characters quote philosophers like Wittgenstein and Heidegger amid the absurdity.

There may be as many ways to interpret this dizzying, maximalist approach as there are representations of Dracula. The scholar and artist Lev Manovich coined the term "database cinema" to describe a new kind of film language that structures content as a series of choices from a database rather than resorting to a traditional, linear narrative.[2] Manovich points to works like Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, which assembles its city imagery by selecting and juxtaposing fragments much like entries from a catalog, and his own "soft cinema," where software pulls clips, sounds, and images from a database to generate variable sequences. In both cases, meaning arises through the recombination of stored elements rather than through linear narrative. Radu Jude's film similarly functions as a database of media clips and aesthetic styles, ultimately reframing the Dracula myth as a query of media artifacts.

Viewers of Dracula experience its database-form like users scrolling through a feed: they see possible Draculas offered, reject some, and accept others as their attention hops. The experience ends up feeling like scrolling, searching, wondering what version will come next. On the one hand, the film demands active decoding as viewers pick up cues from their own memories of Dracula. On the other hand, the viewing turns passive as chapters succeed one another, with patterns unfolding faster than reflection can keep pace.

Dracula as Data Capitalism

Like with most monsters, the fear Dracula inspires adjusts to the changing fears of society. The horrors associated with AI are abundant, ranging from the replacement of labor, to cognitive theft, to outright annihilation. If Victorian anxieties centered around

foreignness, sexuality, and disease, today's techno-feudalism revolves around surveillance, disinformation, and machines that could eclipse their makers. These new fears have been incisively discussed by scholar Shoshana Zuboff, who describes surveillance capitalism as an economic order that "unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material" for a vast algorithmic apparatus.[3] In Zuboff's view, our lives are fodder: every click, location, and emotion is mined and processed into behavioral data, then fashioned into prediction products that anticipate and influence what we do. Zuboff even invokes Dracula to characterize this system, noting that it "revives Karl Marx's old image of capitalism as a vampire that feeds on labor, but with an unexpected turn."[4] Instead of draining workers' blood or toil, it feeds on private human experience itself.

Jude has remarked on this parallel: "The film is called Dracula, because Dracula sucks everything. So, the AI and Dracula are the same thing in a certain way," he explains.[5] Radu Jude's Dracula is no longer a foreign aristocrat at the castle gate, but the impersonal, insatiable system inside our phones and networks. Paul Morrissey's *Blood for Dracula* (1974), which was produced by Andy Warhol, had already reframed the vampire in economic terms, with one character calling him a bourgeois parasite draining the poor, a reading that also fits neatly with Jude's recent Warhol fixation. Jude inherits this political line but directs it toward digital capitalism. One especially grotesque sequence is a reenactment of a short bit of Romanian dialogue from Coppola's *Dracula*. An AI, presumably drawing from a vast database of material including Coppola's movie, generates a grotesque mass of mutations reminiscent of body horror. Nothing in human experience including art, the film suggests, is off-limits to being gobbled up and remixed by the algorithm's appetite.

Jude's film illustrates how modern technology can feel like an assault on our minds. The constant stream of information in our digital lives, from doomscrolling to pop-up ads, mirrors the film's chaotic presentation. The feeling of being overwhelmed and pursued connects the film's aesthetics to the real-world experience of having one's attention constantly under attack.

The Problem of the Film-as-Argument

Jude's film raises a question of medium: does his critique lend itself to cinema? Scenes are shot with deliberate sloppiness, the autofocus wobbles, editing cuts are unexpected and characters deliver lines more like lecturers than actors. The overall effect may be intentionally raw and disjointed, a sort of cinematographic version of AI slop, but one wonders if an essay might have delivered the point more clearly than a film. Of course, there is the tradition of the films *à thèse*, but those works succeed when the thesis is carried by the cinematographic form expressing it. Godard's montage in films like *Histoire(s) du cinéma* enacts an idea through juxtapositions of images, which compels the viewer to connect images and confront contradiction. A Straub-Huillet film thinks through images, sound, and rhythm rather than through linear argument. Their use of landscapes, voices, and duration makes the thesis something experienced instead of

explained. In these films the thesis and the form are fused, and an essay would not carry the same force.[6] But do we really need to see AI slop or feel digital fatigue, to understand what they are?

Once the analogy between Dracula and AI is laid out, Jude bludgeons it without letting it develop. How could he, since making the viewer enjoy the film would go against its own premise. After all, our algorithm-enslaved brains are, in the morally charged world of the art-house filmmaker, not allowed to enjoy the pool of data consumption lightly. And so we are treated like students who are being taught a hard lesson by a teacher who thinks that saying it once is not enough. The protagonist-filmmaker, forever commenting on the film, feels compelled to apologize for the film's length, essentially mansplaining the joke to us. While Jude is certainly aware that his film falls victim to its own premise, one would hope for a filmmaker to wrestle with contradiction through imagination, not simply demonstrate that he has spotted it.

Perhaps most ironically, Jude's film commits the original sin of *othering* Dracula. The count's identity remains outside his own control, a projection of external fears and anxieties. To deny Dracula subjectivity is to deny responsibility for what the monster stands in for. Politically, this keeps the vampire at a safe distance, an empty vessel into which we can pour anxieties without confronting the systems that breed them. It absolves us from asking whether the monster's hunger is our own, whether the algorithmic appetite that drains attention and thought is something we tolerate because it flatters our desires. In the debates around AI, refusing to treat "the monster" as a subject turns it into a projection screen for fears and fantasies, while the real actors, the corporations building it, the governments regulating or failing to regulate it, the societies enthralled by it, escape scrutiny.

Dracula's afterlives shift from monster to mirror, from object of fear to bearer of longing. When, in Coppola's film, Dracula confesses to his beloved, "I have crossed oceans of time to find you," the count becomes less an enemy than a fellow sufferer, a Byronic hero defined by desire for connection. To bring Dracula back to feeling is to remember that even monsters are made legible through the needs of their voice. When we look at today's algorithmic Draculas, perhaps the question is not only how they threaten us, but also what hunger in ourselves allows them to thrive.

1. Szalai, G. (2025). "'Dracula': Radu Jude explains how his film uses AI, deconstructs the myth and pays homage to cinema." The Hollywood Reporter. Available at: https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/dracula-film-radu-jude-sex-trump-musk-ai-interview-locarno-1236323927/ ↵
2. Manovich, L. (1999). Database as symbolic form. *Convergence, 5*(2), 80-99. ↵
3. Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs. ↵

4. Zuboff, S. (2019). Ibid. p. 16. ↩
5. Szalai, G. (2025). ↩
6. See also Kuzma, K. (2025). The art of being camp. *East European Film Bulletin*. Vol. 153. Available here: https://eefb.org/perspectives/radu-jude-and-christian-ferencz-flatzs-eight-postcards-from-utopia-opt-ilustrate-din-lumea-ideala-2024/ ↩