

Scholar of the undead

UVic is home to one of Canada's few scholars of the vampire myth in literature and film

To most of us, Dracula is the shadowy Halloween figure who menaces us with his fanged teeth and blood lust, and then retreats back into his coffin until the same time next year.

Not so for Dr. Peter Golz. For the University of Victoria Germanics studies professor, Dracula and his vampire kin are a year-round source of academic fascination.

Golz studies the cultural history of the vampire in literature and film. And he has plenty of material to work with. Since vampires first made their debut in the literary world in the mid-18th century, there have been thousands of books, poems, plays and scholarly essays dedicated to their evil antics.

Vampire films—which debuted with the silent classic *Nosferatu* in 1922, followed by the 1931 classic, *Dracula*, with Bela Lugosi—now number as high as 1,300. The celluloid vampire has, appropriately, taken many forms and personalities, each a reflection of its time.

“No other character has been portrayed so many times in film, ahead of icons such as Sherlock Holmes, Frankenstein and Robin Hood,” says Golz

of Dracula, the most famous of the undead. “He was by far the most successful myth of the 20th century, and remains as popular as ever.”

Golz’s vampire fascination began when he was a teenager in Germany. He relished Gothic horror, especially Edgar Allen Poe, and he couldn’t get enough of Roman Polanski’s 1967 vampire spoof, *The Fearless Vampire Killers*.

Years later, his interest was rekindled when doing his PhD on Swiss author Adolf Muschg, who wrote on topics as diverse as Oedipus, Orpheus—and vampires. “When I found out I could tie Dracula into it, that’s when I really got going,” he says. “I looked into the folkloristic Dracula, the literary Dracula and, of course, Dracula in film. They’re all so different.”

Since 2001, Golz has been teaching a fourth-year course at UVic on vampires in film. “Once I started preparing for classes I got even more involved in studying the vampire in modern culture,” he says.

For students, the course is about much more than vampires, says Golz. “As in any humanities course, the students are acquiring critical reading and thinking skills that are valuable assets in a number of

professions.” The course attracts 200 students and typically has a waiting list.

Like any other university researcher, Golz publishes peer-reviewed papers, speaks at academic conferences and talks shop with fellow scholars. He also tries to keep up with the steady flow of new vampire content in literature and film, and injects it into his teaching whenever he can.

“Academically, there’s quite a vampire industry, and there’s no end in sight,” he says. The visible proof is his ever-expanding vampire library, which includes more than 200 DVDs and 300 or so books.

Golz is very aware that his unusual academic niche raises a few eyebrows. “You get that reaction with any popular culture topic,” he says, “but we use the same academic tools and apply the same literary and film theory, whether we’re applying it to *Macbeth* or *Hamlet* or *Dracula*.”

Besides, he adds, “popular” shouldn’t be a bad word. “If a book, film or TV show is popular then it’s obviously hitting a nerve. That should be reason enough to look at it with the same critical tools that we use with other aspects of literature and film.”

EDGEwise

Before vampires first appeared in literature in the 18th century, they had lurked in legend for hundreds of years. Almost every ancient culture, including the Babylonians, Greeks and Romans, had an evil mythological figure that drank blood.

Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, which is considered the quintessential vampire novel, entrenched much of the modern vampire lore—bats, the decrepit castle, the gentlemanly count, the wooden stake (although in the book, Dracula is killed by two knives) and the bite on the neck.

The strong sexual overtone of the Dracula story is one reason why it is so popular and enduring, says Golz. “He transgresses all boundaries—between the sexes, life and death, night and day. He defies our laws and morals.” To learn more about vampires in literature and film, visit Golz’s course website at web.uvic.ca/geru/487/.

UVic researchers were awarded more than \$106 million in outside research grants and contracts in 2007/08. This more than doubles the research support of the previous five-year period.

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