

Dracula: the self-aware mass of typewriting



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The era of industrialization ushered in new ways of disseminating and creating art. Along with technological innovation come the anxious reservations of aesthetic purists. These reservations stem from wariness about the dehumanizing effect of mechanical reproduction and a sense of powerlessness over the work of art in its mediated form. In the aftermath of the printing press, writers and artists have struggled to understand this new phenomenon and its effect on the creation of texts. Two texts, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Walter Benjamin's "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility" reflect this towards technology and its effect on the art of writing. In his essay, Benjamin focuses on how the shape of art and its reception have changed in an age of technological reproduction. He also assesses the effects of this new artistic medium on an increasingly evolving public. Simply put, mechanical reproducibility has allowed for the proliferation of copies of art. This has dissolved the validity of the concept of originality in art. There is a rejection of traditional functions of art in favor of new and more expansive functions. Art is now a product for mass consumption and loses its uniqueness, its "aura." Benjamin's discussion of authenticity is interesting for what it implies about the power of an original. He begins by stating, "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity." (220) The authenticity, then, depends on the existence of an original, a beginning point from which all other reproductions will measure up to. All authority derives from this authenticity. This is how art has been traditionally valued. This reliance on the original for authority has implications in terms of the "authenticity" of art that bears no original. The implication is that once the original is lost or destroyed, so has the authority. The definition of authenticity is also dependent on its assumption

of history and tradition. “ The authenticity of a thing,” Benjamin explains, “ is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.” (221) Authenticity is related to the lifespan of the work of art. This is the “ testimony” it bears of its enduring quality. In this sense the work of art is an artifact, a relic of past eras, bearing the combinations of historical and social contexts it has survived. The characters in Dracula share a similar view about the delegation of authority to an original. If Dracula can be viewed as the original, then Mina and the gentlemen who help her destroy Dracula represent mechanical reproducibility. Their insistence on eradicating Dracula despite the risk involved arises out a pure belief in the power of the original. They believe that once they have destroyed Dracula, they will purge the world of the evil and the many vampires he has spawned. He is the “ auratic” original; once he is destroyed, so will his authority and authenticity. When describing the necessity of killing Dracula, Van Helsing emphasizes his uniqueness. “ With this one, all the forces of nature that are occult and deep and strong must have worked together in some wondrous way.” (319) This vampire, more than any other of the “ Un-Dead” has managed to survive centuries due to the combinations of “ occult” forces of nature. He is the original that bears all the marks of history and tradition in his blood. His authority derives from his authenticity and from the “ testimony” of his history in his existence. The vampire-hunters are determined to eradicate their authentic original. Their methods involve technology and reproducing texts. According to Benjamin authority is based on tradition. Two processes lead to a “ shattering of tradition”(221) the substitution of copies for the original and the closeness of the beholder to the reproduction. Both these

developments undermine the traditional functions of art. This shattering of tradition seems to be a good thing. He describes it as “ a renewal of mankind.” (221) By compiling and reproducing texts about their adventures, the characters of Dracula replace the Dracula with copies. In the same way that technological reproduction usurps the authority of the original by virtue of its medium, so do the vampire-hunters. Benjamin’s labeling this a “ renewal of tradition” is also the way Van Helsing labels their mission. The value of art, therefore, is based on the public’s perception of it. As art becomes increasingly detached from its tradition, it becomes more attached to its audience. This is because something is lost in this age of technological reproducibility – the object’s “ aura.” He does not give a definition of this term, but rather describes it as part of an experience of the “ unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be.” (223) The aura is desire for proximity of a work of art while simultaneously maintaining a distance. Therefore the aura is a product of distance, or the perception of distance by the audience. The distance is caused by the object’s uniqueness. With the advent of mechanical reproducibility, that uniqueness has dissolved. Similarly, the characters in Dracula dissolve Dracula’s uniqueness by creating a text about him and subsequently copying this text. They bridge the gap between this figure and their lives by replacing him with a text of themselves. It is their voices, not Dracula’s, that the reader knows through the text. The aura, and Dracula, is lost because a distance is no longer there; the audience, and the characters of the book, is empowered through mechanical reproduction. The dissipation of the aura is a product of what Benjamin sees as the evolution of the public. In this vein, his observations have been labeled “ anthropological” rather than philosophical. He labels this

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audience the “ masses.” The modern public is not concerned with preserving authenticity. The “ masses” want to bridge the differences created by uniqueness. It is “ the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “ closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of everyday reality by accepting its reproduction.” (223) The “ masses” want instant gratification. They no longer value the distance a work of art affords them. By accepting its reproduction, they overcome the uniqueness that distance represents. The shriveling of the aura also has another benefit for the audience the increased opportunity to participate in this new medium. In relation to the printing press and the participation it affords, Benjamin writes With the increasing extension of the press, which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers at first, occasional ones. It began with the daily press opening to its readers space for “ letters to the editor.” And today there is not a gainfully employed European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. (232) The printing press has allowed for any person, from the educated intellectual down to the “ gainfully employed European” to become an author. The proliferation of printed texts has resulted in this blurring of distinctions between the public and author. The reading public now becomes the writing public. By abandoning tradition, mankind has “ renewed” itself, but at the cost of the aura. The printing press has destroyed the aura but it has also generated the energy to write for a public that was denied access to artistic creation because of other considerations. These characters are a good example of

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this phenomenon. Jonathan Harker more than deserves the title, “ gainfully employed European.” His journal, written in shorthand, the most technical form of English, is the foundation for the text. The characters also blur the distinctions between author and public because they each play both roles. They compose the text and are the only readers. They are their own audience. Stoker problematizes this relationship to the printed text. Dracula celebrates these new techniques of disseminating and organizing information, yet those who use it seem comical in their almost religious zeal in using these tools. Mina, the embodiment of this phenomenon of compulsively typing and copying, remarks, “ I feel so grateful to the man who invented the 🐞Traveler’s’ Typewriter and to Mr. Morris for getting this one for me. I should have felt quite astray doing the work if I had to write with a pen.” (350) She writes this as she and Van Helsing are in the midst of Dracula’s exotic and foreign country. It is filled with superstitious natives and lacks the accouterments of any kind of technological innovation. Her only joy is the use of a machine, this “ Traveler’s Typewriter”, the only vestige of the burgeoning manufacturing industry taking over Europe and transforming Western culture. A pen, itself a medium for human presence, would have made Mina feel “ quite astray.” The only way to organize and convey information is by the use of this machine. The reliance on mechanical production for disseminating information is fetishized for Mina, and by extension, modern culture. Benjamin describes this reliance on producibility as the Genesis of an era in which art will no longer be the same. The loss of the aura may be a “ renewal of mankind” but it is not a good development for art. Stoker addresses this fear in this passage. Mina, in the process of losing her humanity and becoming a vampire, relies so heavily on the

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typewriter and its dehumanizing affects. The pen, while still a mediated form, displays the uniqueness of the human presence in handwriting. Humanity then begins to mirror the mechanics of production by becoming systematic and exact. This reflects the influence of modernity on writing. Relics of modernity litter the novel: there are Kodak cameras, bicyclists, messengers bearing telegrams, Winchesters, etc. Technology is a pervasive force in their world. They value it for their destructive purposes, but they are also in awe of it. These vampire-hunters feel a need to record everything as accurately as possible. By recording these supernatural events through these mechanical tools, these English characters maintain a control over a force that makes them feel increasingly powerless. Seward at one point says, “Jonathan Harker has asked me to note this, as he says he is hardly equal to the task, and he wants an exact record kept.” (329) Harker, like Mina, reveres the act of recording and organizing information. This desperate attempt to keep an “exact record” seems the only way to conquer Dracula. As the original, Dracula must be destroyed through the means of technology, by methodically recording and systematizing his movements and history of events. The vampire-hunters seem to crave and foster this disembodied communication. They do not think twice about using all these new and advanced gadgets. The letters between Lucy and Mina, the diaries, Seward’s mechanically reproduced voice – all get compiled into one text. Mina, in the name of expediency and noble cause, assimilates all these traces of human presence into many copies of a typewritten manuscript. Their words, now in the shape of uniform typeset characters, lack any mark of individuality or human origin. Mina is the printing press and Dracula is her text, both literally and figuratively. In reflecting ambivalence towards

modernity, Dracula also resists any type of neat analysis. The text itself is multi-layered and ambiguous and forces the reader to see both perspectives of this phenomenon. In “Vampiric Typewriting: Dracula and Its Media” Jennifer Wicke comments on Dracula’s use of modern media to both compose and destroy itself. “What makes this texts so modern,” she explains, “is that it knows that it will be consumed it stages the very act of its own consumption, and problematizes it.” (491) The book is a very self-aware text. It knows it is the product of mass-reproduction, yet can also maintain a critical view about the process. Stoker’s own act of writing the book and the events of the book seem an endorsement of technological reproducibility. It is the meticulousness of the group and their undying loyalty to recording the text that aids them in destroying and eradicating Dracula. The text addresses the fear of technology but it also affirms the need for technologizing information. When Dracula has attempted to impede his hunters by burning the diaries and phonograph recordings, they are relieved to know there is still a copy of the manuscript in the safe. About this incident, Wicke writes, “this fortuitous reclamation of their labors, and also for the text held in the hand of the reader, all too ironically derives from a copy. If copying is the inevitable fate of the mass-produced, here it is also the salvation.” (490) The reader must now acknowledge that their text is a copy of a copy. The originals have been destroyed, but somehow the text still maintains authority. The text’s existence as a copy of the record of a methodical bunch of Brits is tribute to their tenacity as writers and recorders. If Dracula is the original possessing the aura, this text is the modern version, possessing its own auratic qualities. In her essay Wicke shows that there is a connection between “the sexy act of vamping and such prosaic labor” of <https://assignbuster.com/dracula-the-self-aware-mass-of-typewriting/>

typewriting. (467) In the same way that a vampire sucks the life out of its victims, the typewriters blends all the human voices of the text into one, uniform, dehumanized form. Count Dracula is analogous to the social force of mass culture “ the developing technologies of the media in its many forms, as mass transport, image production and mass-produced narrative.” (469) The text is about consumption and the use of these new media, vampiric though they may be, in the production of texts. Mina, through her use of new media, consumes Dracula through the text and becomes the author of it. Wicke comments that after Dracula bites Mina, she “ also consumes him but without longing, without desire, and with her cognitive faculties intact.” Ever the sound-minded woman that she is, Mina still retains consciousness of herself in the midst of consumption by and of Dracula. In fact, she seems to possess deeper insights into Dracula’s whereabouts and is given more authority in the text. Wicke comments that “ Mina becomes more and more the author of the text; she takes over huge stretches of its narration, she is responsible for giving her vampire-hunting colleagues all information on Dracula’s whereabouts.” (485) Because Mina has entered into the realm of consumption, the text is hers. She consumes Dracula as the auratic original through the text and physically as a vampire. Or, as Wicke phrases it, “ vampiric typewriting.” However, Dracula can also be viewed as the epitome of consumption. Wicke comments that “ the text’s action absolutely depends on the inclusion of mass-produced testimony; it absorbs these extraneous pieces within itself just as Dracula assimilates the life-blood of his victims.” (474) Therefore Dracula is also the sight of assimilation of differences. He is the unique original, yet he also contains multitudes. There is a kinship between the text’s “ mass-produced testimony” and the testimony that

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Dracula bears of his history and tradition. The text, an instrument of consumption works to eradicate the original consumer. Hence Wicke's conclusion that Dracula mounts " a search and destroy mission against itself." (491) The text works through its own anxiety about the nature of mass-production and mass culture. Stoker complicates and enriches the modern dilemma by presenting his readers with a text that knows itself so well it both celebrates and criticizes its media. The text shares similar ideas about art also presented by Benjamin. Both texts seem t present art in the age of mass-production as a somewhat lethal and threatening force. It is consciously consumptive, sucking the life out humanity and infusing it into its reproduction. Life, memory, and art in the end only amount to a " mass of typewriting." But it is a clever and self-aware mass.