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Dracula the Jew: Antisemitism and Hollywood's Vampire

When a contemporary American audience views 1930s Hollywood horror films, its reaction is as one to comedy, with laughter and making fun of over-acting characters. This follows with Tod Browning's 1931 Dracula, which a recent English 400 class at The University of Arizona coded as painfully boring and not at all scary. A contemporary audience need look no further, however, than in the film's subtle symbolism to find the real terror of Dracula: antisemitism. While a contemporary audience looking at Veit Harlan's 1940 Jud Süß would be shocked at the film's rabid Jew hatred, it would not be surprised because the movie's purpose was Nazi propaganda. Dracula, a film created to entertain and terrify early American film audiences, has a similar layer of Jew hatred that can be made obvious by looking to the film's subtle symbolism and stereotyping.

Background

The 1930s followed the disastrous Depression brought on by the 1929 stock market crash. The crash had a global effect. In countries around Europe, most notably Germany, the Jewish populace became a scapegoat for the social turmoil, hunger and desolation brought on by the Depression (Trueman, 1). One element of American history left out of high school history textbooks is a similar scapegoating of Jews in the United States as, according to historian Jerry Klinger, "Millions upon millions of people were disastrously affected economically. Many looked for someone to blame. Jews were scapegoated and directly impacted..." (1). With the

Depression as an impetus, following World War I and the flood of Eastern European émigrés who fled Europe with the rise of fascism and violent antisemitism, Klinger wrote, “American anti-Semitism [stet] reached its pre WWII [stet] zenith” (1). Other factors, such as Henry Ford’s antisemitic newspaper, the Dearborn Michigan Independent, Father James Coughlin’s popular antisemitic syndicated radio broadcasts, the German American Bund and the Depression, contribute to the aura of antisemitism in the U.S., making it no wonder that a film like Dracula would have antisemitic undertones in it very similar to those in the German Jud Süß.

Jud Süß has been a very controversial film since the end of World War II. The jacket of the film available at The University of Arizona Main Library warns it contains “The most controversial film of all time” and the copy available at Casa Video in Tucson has changed the title to “Jud Süß: The Indoctrination of Racial Hatred.” The film is based loosely on historical events and a 1920s German play. The main character of Jud Süß represents the 17th Century Joseph Süß Oppenheimer, a Jew who rose to power in Württemberg as a private banker, purveyor, gem-collector and financial administrator to Duke Carl Alexander (Sachar, 25). Known today as one of the Court Jews, the lucky few who were allowed at court and who wielded influence over the ruling courts of Europe, Süß Oppenheimer made some greedy mistakes as financial administrator that led to his hanging in 1738 (Sachar, 25). He became an infamous character in German history, although Lion Feuchtwanger wrote a play about him in the 1920s that attempted to humanize and remove the antisemitic tendencies from Süß Oppenheimer’s legend. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Propaganda Minister, heard about Feuchtwanger’s novel and thought it great fodder for an antisemitic propaganda film (Mannes, 30).

When Goebbels read the screenplay for the film in 1939, he wrote in his diary, “Manuskript zum Film ‘Jud Süß’ gelesen. Von E.W. Möller. Ausgezeichnet geworden. Der erste wirklich antisemitische Film” (Mannes, 30). After contracting Harlan to direct the film, Goebbels kept a close eye on production and editing in every stage of Jud Süß’ production to make sure the film fit with Nazi ideals (Mannes, 31). His involvement with production paid off as, according to Eric Rentschler, “After Jud Süß’ premiere, Goebbels noted in his diary he thought the film was a successful work of propaganda: ‘The premiere of *Jew Süß* [sic]. A very large audience with almost the entire Reich Cabinet. The film is an incredible success. One hears only enthusiastic responses. The whole room raves. That’s exactly what I had hoped for’” (149). Critics around Europe also lauded the film, ignoring the inherent antisemitism. According to Rentschler, “The young Italian critic Michelangelo Antonioni responded to the film’s Venice Festival showing with great enthusiasm: ‘We have no hesitation in saying that if this is propaganda, then we welcome propaganda. It is a powerful, incisive, extremely effective film’” (153-154). After World War II, Veit Harlan was the only Nazi film director tried for crimes against humanity. He was convicted, appealed under the argument the film’s antisemitic elements were included all at Goebbels’ behest, and exonerated. The film was not exonerated, as it was shown to German troops going to war, concentration camp officers, citizens in areas where concentration camps were being built, and to the general populace as a means of inciting a fear of and hatred for Jews (Rentschler, 154). Today, Jud Süß is not shown in Germany except at closed government screenings and for educational purposes (Rentschler, 150). The film is available elsewhere in the world, and is a favorite of white supremacist groups in the U.S. (Rentschler, 150).

Juxtaposition

Whereas Jud Süß is blatantly antisemitic, Dracula is more symbolically so. One scene in Dracula illustrating this symbolic antisemitism is toward the beginning of the film, when Dracula and Renfield have first met and are looking over paperwork for Dracula's passage to England and rent of Carfax Abby. As Dracula moves about the room, it becomes obvious he is wearing a pendant with the Star of David on it. When he leans into various positions or moves through different kinds of lighting, the pendant leans ahead of him or flashes to catch the viewer's attention. The Star of David is a symbol of Judaism and was used in Medieval Europe to differentiate Jews from Christians (Simmons, 1). Dracula's wearing of this Jewish symbol equates the vampire with the Jew, the alien "other" in Western, Christian society—something foreign to Christianity and threatening to it. This symbolism is made more obvious when Dracula bends toward Renfield's bleeding finger and a crucifix falls from Renfield's pocket, dangling prominently in a close-up shot. The crucifix passes over Renfield's bleeding finger, perhaps symbolizing the role of Christianity to protect the blood, and thus life and afterlife, of its followers against extra-Christian threats. Dracula recoils from the Christian symbol, which could symbolize the Jews' collective refusal over the course of history to convert to Christianity.

While there is no scene in Jud Süß that directly parallels this scene from Dracula, there are many similarities brought out by Browning's film's symbolism. Apart from the symbolic Star of David, Dracula is not an overtly Jewish character. He is handsome, well-groomed and dresses fashionably. In Jud Süß, Süß cuts his hair and removes his caftan before entering Württemberg. He disguises his typically Jewish features with a fashionable hairstyle and elegant clothing. He is also a handsome character, and when he meets the innocent, blonde Dorothea on the road, she does not realize he is a Jew. Likewise in Dracula, Mina and Lucy do not realize Dracula is a vampire when they meet him. In both films, this inability of other characters to recognize the

Jew/vampire symbolizes a threat to the audience's safety because an unidentifiable monster could so easily infiltrate society. There is one character in both films, however, who initially realizes the threat Süß/Dracula poses. Van Helsing, because of his knowledge of Central and Eastern Europe, recognizes Dracula after observing his lack of a shadow and strong reaction to the wolfsbane plant. Faber takes one look at Süß' dark features and demeanor, and admonishes his naïve fiancée for bringing a Jew into the city. Both Faber and Van Helsing become heroes at the end of each film, with Van Helsing staking Dracula through the heart and Faber capturing Süß for his trial and hanging. In both films, this can be interpreted as a warning to the audience to always be on the lookout for the "other," to be vigilant for telltale signs and ensure the vampire/Jew does not enter the home society to wreak havoc.

The extremity of what can happen by allowing such a threat into the home society is visible through scenes in both Dracula and Jud Süß. Dracula is seen twice entering a young woman's bedroom and bending down to "attack," or drink her blood. Dracula is a vampire, feeding off the women to maintain his vitality. When he attacks Mina, however, it appears he has an ulterior motive in making her one of his wives. He is thus stealing another man's fiancée, robbing a father of his daughter, and stripping British society of one of its maidens by making her something other than what she began life as. Süß' attack on Dorothea is less subtle. When she comes to ask him to free her new husband from the torture chamber, Süß proceeds in throwing Dorothea onto his bed and climbing atop her in such a way as to suggest he is about to rape her. This scene cuts to one of Faber being freed from the thumb screws. A few scenes later, Dorothea is shown stumbling through the city's streets, a look of numb horror on her face as she wraps a shawl protectively about herself. We find later she drowned herself in the river rather than risk of bringing a half-Jewish child into the world. In both films, the scene fades out quietly

and ominously right before the attack, alluding to the corruption of the woman by the male antagonist. While women in both films undergo some danger from contact with the outsider, Mina is saved from her fate as a vampire, of becoming one of “the others,” whereas Dorothea must kill herself so she doesn’t bring one of “the others” into the world. In both cases, the societal other preying on women underscores the assault on safety the Jew/vampire brings with it.

Another way Dracula’s threat by entering the home carries through to Jud Süß is not just in Süß’ entrance of Württemberg at a time when Jews are not allowed to pass through the city gate, but also his execution of power as financial administrator. After the duke gives him control of the roads, Süß calls on a blacksmith whose home lies in such a position as to make the road curve around it. Süß explains that since the road should technically lie underneath half of the house, the smith should pay Süß to keep the house as it is. The smith is outraged because his home has always been there, but Süß is determined to make the road straight. Soon after the smith and Süß’ meeting is a scene where Süß and his mistress ride up to the smith’s house in a carriage, laughing because half house has been removed, creating the illusion of a life-sized dollhouse sitting on the side of the newly-straightened road. Although Süß did not physically enter the smith’s house and violate his family, he violated the sanctity of the home by tearing it open for the world to see into, as evinced by the crowd of peasants milling around the “dollhouse” in awe. This could be yet another warning, that giving Jews power means the inherent destruction of the safety of the home. This translates into Dracula, because allowing him into the home directly violates the inhabitants’ personal safety. Mina’s servant falls under Dracula’s spell and lets him into Mina’s room, much as Carl Alexander falls prey to Süß’ charms

and allows him to stay in the city. Both Württemberg and Mina's room then become symbolic of western countries. In both cases, allowing the outsider in opens the door for certain danger.

This vein of fear at allowing the "other" into Western society runs deep in each film, translating into the traditional Jewish-assimilation fears of Western societies (Weinstein, 8). In Jud Süß, Süß paves the way for a hoard of scruffy, weird-looking and -sounding Jews to enter Württemberg after he charms the duke into changing his mind about the Jewish ban. To the film's target audience, the stream of Jews entering the city would have been as symbolically horrible as a stream of rats pouring into a grain room to devour all the winter's supplies.

According to Valerie Weinstein,

"That Süß can convince the duke to lift the ban on Jews shows his ability not only to surmount the boundary himself, but to render it more permeable for all. Süß's power results in a reign of atrocities in Württemberg: inflation, torture, rape, revolution, and unjust execution—just to name a few. These horrifying effects of Süß's penetration of Stuttgart's boundaries, enabled by his passing, help convince the viewer that Jews and Aryans should remain separate and that the distinctions between them should remain clear" (10).

Dracula brings a similar idea with him in the death he brings to the London residents he feeds on, killing them and creating a society of murderous vampires. Just as Dracula sees England as a watering hole of fresh blood, Süß sees Württemberg as a land of "milch und honig" for the Jewish people, a new Israel. For both characters, then, there are new opportunities to flourish and populate in Western civilization. Both characters also pose a threat to the home society's bloodlines—by removing them in Dracula's case and by corrupting their purity in Süß'. This

action goes in hand with traditional stereotypes dictating Jewish men's foremost wish to be in corrupting other races' bloodlines (Trueman, 1). Another interesting correspondence between Dracula and Süß is the manner in which they live. Dracula prefers to live in decay, with a moldy, crumbling castle and refusing to renovate Carfax Abby; Süß lives in decadence, long seen as the path to decay, through his elaborate parties for the duke, lascivious tendencies, rich tastes and greed. Both characters also employ a high level of sex appeal, another common stereotype of "lascivious" Jewish men (Weinstein, 8). There is an emphasis on both characters' eyes in the films—for Dracula, to show the powerful spell he casts on those around him, and for Süß, to show the sinister machinations beneath his glamorous appearance. They are both soft-spoken, calm and cool "bad guys," never growing outwardly agitated or angry. They both operate in darkness—Dracula in the dark of night and Süß in the shadows of the duke's residence. And of ultimate importance, both Dracula and Süß seek the love and thus destruction of an innocent, sweet, virgin.

The clear antisemitic solution to the Jew/vampire presented in each film is also similar. Van Helsing runs a stake through Dracula's heart, removing him from his eternal bloodlust. The threat is then dead and no longer poses a threat to Londoners. Likewise, Süß is hung from an inordinately high gallows, a spectacle before all the people, and the Jewish ban is reenacted with a speech by Dorothea's grieving father:

„Die Landstände verkünden durch meinen Mund den Willen des württembergischen Volkes: Alle Juden haben innerhalb dreier Tage Württemberg zu verlassen. Für ganz Württemberg gilt hiermit der Judenbann! Gegeben zu Stuttgart 1738. Mögen unsere Nachfahren an diesem Gesetz ehern festhalten, auf daß ihnen viel Leid erspart bleibe an ihrem Gut und Leben und an dem Blut ihrer Kinder und Kindeskinde" (Mannes, 49).

The ban proclamation is a cry against the contamination of pure German bloodlines by the Jewish hoards, just as Dracula's staking is a revolt against the murder or horrific alteration of London's young women. In both Jud Süß and Dracula, the ultimate way to thwart the Jew/vampire's efforts to ruin Western society is to kill him and drive his relatives away for good. This is a clearly antisemitic solution, made indisputable by such evidence as the Shoah¹ that killed six million European Jews after both Dracula and Jud Süß came out.

Conclusion

After such exploration, it is clear the similarities between Dracula and Süß' characters are many. The resemblances are all negative and can be applied to traditional Jewish stereotyping. Given the history of antisemitism in Germany, stretching far back before the Middle Ages, and beginning to rise vehemently in the U.S. after the 1890s, the antisemitic tendencies in filmmaking of the 1930s and 40s should not be a surprise. Perhaps a contemporary audience would be just as horrified of Dracula as they are of Jud Süß if the antisemitic symbolism and stereotypes in the film were as pronounced, or as clearly labeled (e.g. Nazi propaganda). We can not know the real intentions Tod Browning held in his mind while directing Dracula, but given the imagery he created in making the film, and the evidence gathered here, there is no questioning the antisemitism employed in this early Hollywood horror movie.

¹ Preferred term for the Holocaust. The Hebrew word "Shoah" means "the burning" or "calamity," whereas the Greek "Holocaust" means "burnt offering." Since the Nazis were not making a religious offering of the Jews, many German studies experts believe it more politically correct to term the genocide "Shoah" out of respect for those killed. This is knowledge I have gained in several courses taught by Prof. Thomas Kovach at The University of Arizona.

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