

Dracula Untold (2014)

A visionary, powerful and epic fantasy in the land of *The Lord of the Rings*



Dracula Untold is the most unexpected and riveting film of the season. Young director Shore's very first feature film combines the kind of youthful zest and zeal for romance and love that characterizes the most promising starting carriers. When sweeping action and stylized aesthetics meet a visionary look on re-imagined historical facts and a deep reflection on the nature and consequences of evil and its place in the plans of Providence... it gets close to being a masterpiece. A flawed but thrilling experience !

SYNOPSIS

The year is 1462. Transylvania has enjoyed a prolonged period of peace under the just and fair rule of the royal Prince of Wallachia, Vlad Tepes III (**Luke Evans**) and his beautiful loving wife Mirena (**Sarah Gadon**), father and mother to an adorable son, Ingeras. Together, they have ensured its people are well-protected, especially from the powerful and ever-expanding Ottoman Empire, a threatening scourge holding its sights on global domination.

The introduction is swift and gradually accelerates the pace. When Prince Vlad and his men find a Turkish helmet in a river while hunting, Vlad utters ominous words that epitomize the entire film to come : “*What they explore, they conquer.*” When the invading Turkish army led by Sultan Mehmed demands 1000 Wallachia’s young boys, including Vlad’s own son, to join the Janissary corps and begin conquering Europe through Hungary – we’re also informed about a certain siege of Vienna –, Vlad, knowing that he is severely outnumbered – and recalling his own brutal uprising among the Janissaries as a royal hostage – journeys to Broken Tooth Mountain, where enters into a **Faustian bargain** with a foul demon who gives the prince the strength of 1000 men, the speed of a falling star and enough power to crush his enemies. However, he will be inflicted with an insatiable thirst to drink human blood. If by the end of three days Vlad manages to resist this hunger, he will return to his former human self after saving his kingdom. Though should he drink, he will be lost, forced to dwell in the darkness for eternity, feeding only on human blood, and destroying all that he holds dear...

REVIEW



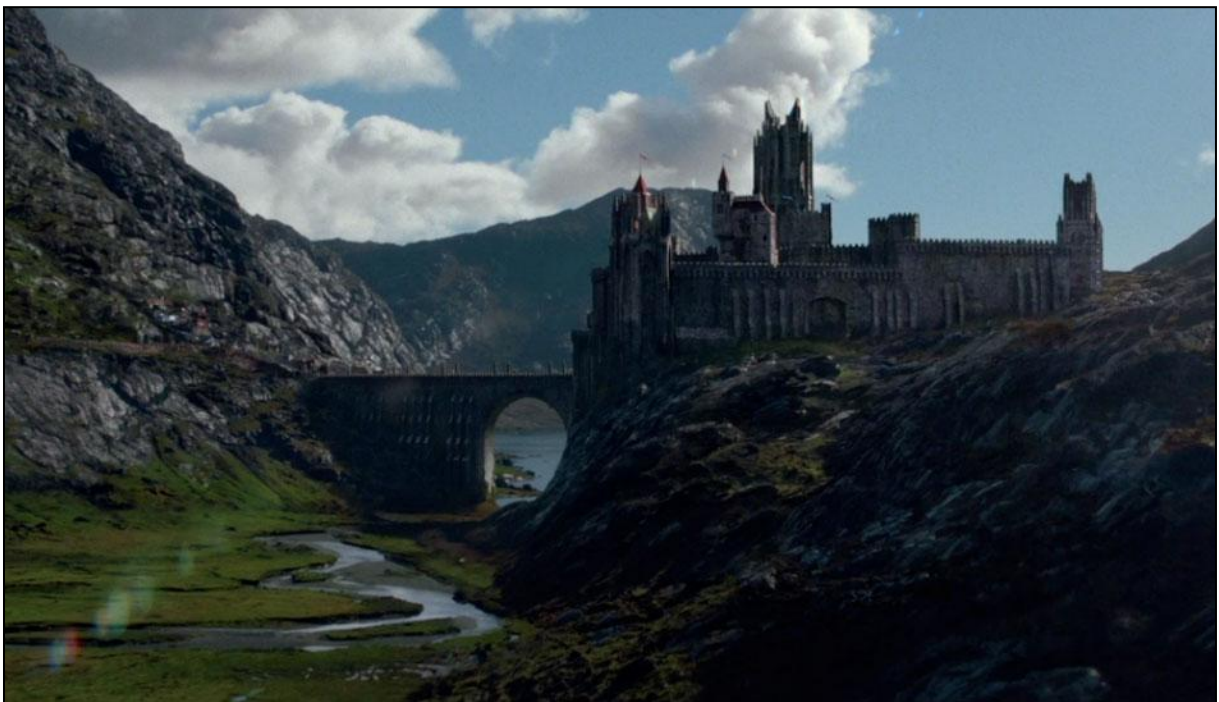
This movie was definitely not what I was expecting at all. It was more, much more. *Dracula Untold* is a multi-levelled experience, part family fantasy flick, part Gothic nightmare, and part violent History. In short, this wildly eclectic movie takes elements from several sources, combining the real history of Vlad III and the Ottoman Empire with Bram Stoker’s literary masterpiece, to make an epic action movie filled with symbolical allusions – a movie of **resonant gesture and logic** in which ancient and contemporary predicaments are fused in ominous warning, which makes it even more viscerally and emotionally powerful. And with the charismatic presence of Welsh actor **Luke Evans** (*The Hobbit*) to anchor the manly proceedings, well, I couldn’t exactly pass. To be clear, if you’re expecting an R-rated gory horror film or a CGI-enhanced remake of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Dracula* you will be disappointed, for it delivers little in the way of gore and scares.

Given that these kinds of movies are not for everyone and require a certain level of subtlety to understand everything in it and to appreciate it fully, I wouldn’t recommend it blindly to all, but mostly to fans of the genre and to all open-minded viewers whose curiosity I will arise through the following analysis.

WHY GO FOR IT ?

- **Astounding visuals**

A striking tonal cinematography. *Dracula Untold* provides an evocative play of intuitive lights and shades enhanced by stunning CGI visuals. Gary Shore has privileged tonal filming, relying mainly on two hue ensembles : black / blue / silver and white / red / gold which correspond to the world of night and day, but also death and life, temptation or comforting, cold demons or human warmth.



A breathtaking Irish scenery. At one point, just before the war against the Turks breaks out, Gary Shore did this crazy XLS (*extreme long shot*) with totally silhouetted figures on one side of the frame, with a cold and perfectly blue sky providing for backlighting, too, and the slope running towards some freaking razor-shaped mountain. This is the point when Vlad understands how powerless he is. This is when he wholly embraces the limits of his own humanity. It felt like something Visconti would have done in *Il Gattopardo* or *Gone with the Wind*. Those moments of greatness, as rare as they may be, complement the wholesomeness of this rare visual experience.

Dracula : The perfect marriage between newfangled VFX and old school wizardry. The costumes by renowned designer **Ngila Dickson** (*The Lord of the Rings*, *The Last Samurai*), a brilliant but non-ostentatious ensemble of historically-inspired furs, richly embroidered brocades and stylised armours, perfectly tailor Evans's intimidating stature.



While the boots and red cloak support his good prince image, later clothing choices afford the new-born Dracula a darker and eerie gargoyle vibe. *But what would Dracula be without fangs and supernatural powers ?* Evans rocks the fangs as if they were natural extensions of his body, confirming the credibility of his beguiling new self. Likewise, all the visuals that complement the dark side of Vlad, such as the hypnotic flaming glow that arises in his eyes while he conjures his powers to see clearly at night, the impressive hand of bats or the morphing tricks, make for a spellbinding big screen experience. Along the way, Dracula also finds himself impaired by the usual problems faced by vampires, like a terrible reaction to sunlight and an aversion to silver. The latter weakness is exploited by Mehmed in a climactic [sword fight](#) in which he uses thousands of silver coins to stack the odds.

Ostentatious and epic CGI battle sequences. Action scenes in *Dracula Untold* are simply astounding : stylish and frightening without being gory. The three battle scenes especially are mightily impressive. For instance we get to see Vlad summon a colony of bats to defeat the Turkish army during the climactic battle. But the simpler sequence, during the first battle, of Prince Vlad running in slow motion to face his enemies is also a visually dazzling experience, as seen through the reflection of a sword planted in a corpse in the foreground. Whew !

- **Two perfect leads**

Luke Evans as Vlad. With his natural confidence, his commanding poise and presence, his history as a hero and a father figure, subtly combining inner strength and romantic sadness (*The Hobbit*), rising Welsh actor Luke Evans was the best choice possible for Prince Vlad. At the beginning of the film, Vlad is in a good place. He's had ten years of peace as a great ruler and a revered leader. His people are happy and everything is prosperous. But in the minute he becomes a vampire, things begin to get uneven : on the one hand, he is very powerful – *his new abilities include speaking without opening his mouth, flying, jumping, crushing rocks and enemies with his bare hands* – but on the other, he realizes that he has new limits, limits that he didn't have when he was still human – namely his aversion to silver and to the sun, his craving for human blood – and thus he loses all confidence and security. As the cracks begin to show, you see that he's actually become a very vulnerable leader, never more afraid to lose what he has and what he really cares about...

Sarah Gadon as Mirena. Always at ease with period films, [Sarah Gadon](#) embraces the only female role in the film with warmth and subtlety. She represents the moral compass, the light side of Vlad, the reason why he cannot completely abandon his humanity...



But at the same time she's also the one to bring him to his doom in the end, as in *Star Wars III : The Revenge of the Sith*, where Anakin embraces the Dark Side to save Padmé's life – except he loses her in the end !

- **Great Villains**

Charles Dance and Dominic Cooper. The vampire demon who sired Vlad and Sultan Mehmed II both succeed to make a swift yet lasting ‘villain’ impression, each in their own way, – mostly because of the quality of their introduction I guess. The vampire gets more time growling, killing, talking in the dark and being talked of than actually being seen, which is the cleverest way to install fear of course. And Mehmed is first seen in his full golden military apparel in a mirror reflection, in an *upside down* position – a quite powerful image, which finds its echo in a pitiless chiasma by the end of the movie, when Mehmed dies and falls on the ground : once again, the camera captures his face in a frightening upside-down close-up.

Most of the supporting characters were severely underdeveloped due to lack of time. And yet, some of them did not miss to make a lasting impression on screen, starting with the blond Ottoman assassin ‘*Bright Eyes*’ (**Thor Kristjansson**) and Brother Lucian (**Paul Keyes**), who always seems to appear from nowhere, but each time as if he had never ceased to be here...

- **A fast-paced scenario**

Clocked in at a mere 93 minutes, *Dracula Untold* is compelling experience devoid of any of those extended battle sequences or tedious speeches that sunk most fantasy films in the last decade. Although it does feel a little rushed at times, the audience has time enough to invest emotionally with their heart still pounding over time...

- **An unexpected twist on the tale**

***Dracula Untold* : history or fantasy ?** Here is what Luke Evans said in an interview about the title : “I keep forgetting this. I have to be reminded this : *it’s a Dracula film !* For me, it was very much a film about History and Vlad, and where *that* story came from. I find it amazing that they’re calling it *Dracula*, because for me it felt like something *very, very different*. Especially when Vlad meets the Sultan. At this point, we sort of wanted to... well, that’s a whole different film.” Shore made it clear from the upstart that his film wouldn’t be loaded with sex and carnages as vampire stories usually are : “Blood is an omnipresent iconic story point of vampirism. We can’t deny that, but gore doesn’t have to be. If you want to see a film R-rated gory horror film” about a sadistic vampire who lures women to his bed before biting them to death, or a documentary about impaling techniques, this is probably not it.

- **A timeless love story**

The strength of love and family. On the contrary, *Dracula Untold* conveys strong family values. Here is how Sarah Gadon perceived it : “A lot of the film is centered around the **family unit**. And I guess the major themes of the film are the sacrifices we’re willing to make for our families to keep them safe and together.” The film also focuses on her relationship with her husband Vlad. And you can look at it in very real terms, if you’ve ever had someone in your life who has been struggling with something, with some addiction, temptation or sin, and you are trying to help. “It’s about the resilience of love, and how much you’re willing to struggle *with and for* somebody to preserve your relationship, but also to try and preserve *them as a person* and not only for yourself”, even if it means you may have to die for it. After watching Vlad and Mirena do everything to keep their son and people safe and sound, we come by the end of the film with this satisfying feeling that we’ve just witnessed, as Mirena puts it in one of my favourite scenes – when she talks with Vlad about their vows of marriage, not only a prince fighting for his country, but mostly “two parents fulfilling their duties.”



And so *Dracula Untold* isn't just another film that favours spectacle and style over substance.

- **Behind the screen**

Sacrifices and choices. Sarah Gadon explains this aspect of the film : “Mirena, Vlad and Ingeras all have their own choices to make. The way I like to think about is that when you’re young, you form your ideas about the world. And you have all these principles. **And then you grow up, and those principles are tested.** That’s what I think the film touches on and plays with.” In a moment of desperation, Vlad chooses. He chooses wrong, and he knows so. “He really knows that most people are not going to like what he’s done, especially his wife. When she learns the truth, she’s mortified that he’s decided to choose this dark, inhuman, anti-Christian life”. But she never asks too many questions. She stays behind quite many times, but she does all she can to help him keep his humanity and beg for God’s forgiveness. She trusts him. It’s more difficult with his people of course, because he has to “convince his armies and his men that everything looks terrible, and it looks like we’re all going to die, but you have to trust me.” Dracula is also about the **choices leaders have to make for better good.** It’s such a **responsibility.** He’s a prince, a husband and a father. He is accountable to God, to his people, and to his wife and son.

Resisting to Temptations. A lot of the film is about Vlad resisting to the temptation of becoming a full vampire. And it’s not easy, since during a break in the action, when he is just about to enjoy some connubial bliss, he’s stricken by the sight of blood coursing through his beloved’s veins. He quickly excuses himself, explaining in gentlemanly fashion : ‘*I need some air...*’ And then there’s this scene when a demon follows him into the dark forest and induces him into temptation. It’s the second time Vlad is faced to such a dilemma but he still resists and throws the cup away. And then the blood, which is spilled on the ground, begins to ‘talk’ to him but he resists once again. The day after there’s this moment of doubt and fear when Brother Lucian reveals what Vlad is about to become if he succumbs, and Vlad gets all angry and desperate but Mirena is here to put the people to peace and bring him to reflect : ‘*This new self is not you...*’ Vlad understands he cannot do it on his own and prays to resist one day more. Even the character played by Charles Dance acknowledges this possibility to resist to temptation : he does not force Vlad in any way. You have, deep inside *Dracula Untold*, this reflection about **temptation, freedom and resistance.** And on how, even when you fall and even if you can’t come back, you still have a possibility to make good things, and to make things right. And how evil is only allowed by God because good can still come out of it...

Sin, suffering and death. When he enters the cave to seek the demon's powers, Vlad thinks he is gaining the ultimate strength and confidence. But the demon is fooling him, arousing his curiosity and desire under the appearances of good. « *The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.* » And so he pretends to be 'lending' him powers for three days but what actually happens is that Vlad is now tied to him. He's also being stalked by some kind of demon slave. And it all happens so nicely, so gradually, that Vlad feels empowered and free at first. But then the consequences are terrible. By the third battle, Vlad loses his wife, his confidence, the trust of his people, and Ingeras becomes twice an orphan in less than twenty minutes. Because there is no ambiguity about the origin of Vlad's supernatural powers, there is none about the prices that will have to be paid either : Vlad gradually loses his humanity, is deprived of the simple pleasures linked to connubial life – he cannot be with his wife because he's too afraid to hurt her –, and eventually, he will be damned if he succumbs. The last images with the army of vampire demons being burnt by the sun is one of the most desperate and powerful things I've ever seen. Watching them cry and growl from pain and look at the blinding sky with tormented eyes as if they didn't quite understand what was happening to them and yet intuitively grasping the yet even more painful horrors to come, – with their bodies literally transforming to dust... was like catching a glimpse of Hell ! This aspect of the film may seem extremely dark and uncompromising, but it does walk hand in hand with an even stronger sense of **altruism and love**. *Dracula Untold* isn't one of those appalling hopeless show-off films where suffering is shown for suffering, and evil for evil.

Hope and Providence. There is a strong sense of greater good that comes out of it. Vlad and Mirena both die but their choices and sacrifices were not for nothing. Their blood still runs in their son's veins, and all in all, if the path Vlad chose was steep and mazy, God found a way to take the situation in hands and make things right in the long term. In the end, **Prince Ingeras** isn't saved by Vlad alone. **Brother Lucian** comes to the rescue with his cross, chases all the vampire demons and takes Ingeras away while Vlad stays behind to give them time to flee. This **altruistic understanding of love** may also be seen, for instance, in *The Lord of the Rings*, when Aragorn proposes to attack the Black Gate to give Sam and Frodo a chance to reach Mont Doom and fulfil the mission. Hope infuses this film, and evil is shown as being a mere instrument in the way to victory. I've rarely seen a film where victory seemed so sure, except you keep asking yourself : "*But how ? It really doesn't look good for now!*"

All in all, I loved it. It is certainly not to be missed ! +++