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HOOK, LINE AND SINKER IN *HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA 3: SUMMER VACATION* (2018)

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Abstract: *The present study stems from the question of the type of mechanisms which drive viewers to root for the main character in a movie, and it focuses on key scenes in the movie Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation (2018), which develop the main character's personality and endear him to the audience.*
Keywords: *character allegiance, character alignment, empathy, film structure, humour*

1. Introduction

The reception of a movie as a rewarding experience depends, to a large extent, on the viewers' perception of its characters. According to N. Carroll, sympathy "is the most pervasive emotion from the beginning to the end of the movie" (2008:178). We respond to what happens in the movie and to the main character only if the events provide us with sufficient material to logically assess the character's strengths and weaknesses. Beyond the growth or fall of the main character, however, our emotional response is grounded in the warp and weft of the story. We recognize the character's motivations leading to action (Iglesias 2005) or are fascinated with the character's puzzling personality, a mechanism ultimately leading to allegiance (Smith 1995).

The movie under scrutiny is the third in the series of 3D animations produced by Sony and Columbia and directed by Genndy Tartakovsky. *Hotel Transylvania* (2012) centers on the sharp division between the world of the humans and that of the monsters, under the careful watch of Count Dracula, the owner of a hotel for monsters. Monsters are not what they seem, humans can prove worse than we know, 'identity seems to have become a luxury, although it gives the impression that it is quite at hand; the boundaries are changing, the guidelines often turn out to be misleading and distracting' (Nicolae 2010:319). In *Hotel Transylvania 2* (2015), the hotel is open to humans and the generation conflict moves from father-daughter to a general conspiracy against Dracula's father learning that young Dennis might not be a vampire. In the third installment of the series the monsters embark on a monster cruise full of surprises where Dracula confronts a haunting enemy and falls in love.

2. Meet the Monsters

The opening scene of *Hotel Transylvania 3*: *Summer Vacation* (2018) finds the group of monsters on the train to Budapest, wearing traditional gypsy head scarfs to hide their true nature. They are presented in medium close-up from behind at first, and their synchronous head turn facing the camera, when they are asked to hand in the ticket, serves the function of establishing their strength as a group. Dracula's reaction stands out, as he addresses the ticket inspector politely. It is the first step to turning the main character into a *deserving* one. According to Brown (2011), a character is sympathetic if s/he is *in trouble*, *vulnerable*, an *underdog* or

deserving. It is interesting to note that the first three have little effect on viewers unless the fourth is ensured. Viewers are drawn to characters who are interesting, because they have some extraordinary powers, abilities or make us laugh. Scene by scene, Dracula's politeness is completed by his ability to keep a scared child under control with one of his extraordinary abilities, hypnotizing the child into acting like a cat.

Dracula's life-long enemy makes a memorable entry, announcing his determination to eradicate all monsters on site. Abraham van Helsing is shown in low angle shot, which usually underscores a character's position of power. Van Helsing is thus established as the imminent counterpart to the group of monsters. The pompous speech completes the visual presentation in such a way that viewers experience an instant dislike for the character right before Dracula's sense of humour is signalled as he comments 'not this clown again' ((*Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation* script). Sense of humour aligns Dracula to the viewers' first impression of the Count's enemy and positions viewers on his side.

In *Hotel Transylvania* and *Hotel Transylvania 2* Dracula was portrayed as over protective of his daughter against contact with humans and of his grandson against his father's assumed rage once he found out Dennis' true nature. Now time has come to protect his friends from Van Helsing's destructive weapon. He puts the safety of the others above his own in an amusing scene, rife with physical comedy, throwing them off the train to safety, ready to confront Van Helsing on his own. Another extraordinary ability is exhibited, which takes even his enemy by surprise, when Dracula turns into a mouse and escapes danger once again. Next, exaggeration, repetition and literalization (Harries 2000) are effectively employed in a succession of past close encounters between Dracula and Van Helsing, all driven by the latter's obsession with eradicating the former, yet having the same bad ending for the human.

The next scene is a perfect example of self-reflexivity, as Dracula comments on his stressful existence. The low-angle long shot of Dracula on the edge of an abrupt cliff transitions to an eye-level medium close-up as Dracula breaks the fourth wall and addresses us. Dramatic irony is given a twist because the character steps out of his character role verbally, giving us a spoiler sentence which sums up the ensuing story:

> *Dracula: Boy, that guy is annoying.*
> *Maybe one day there will be a place where*
> *the monsters can go, to get away from it all.*
> *Take a vacation, who knows? Maybe even*
> *get married. Wouldn't that be something?*
> *(Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation* script)

Power is an essential component of Dracula's appeal. One amusing manifestation is the scene in which he manages to keep Tinkles, the dog, under control before it ruins the whole wedding scenery. The effect of Tinkles' drooling all over the place and the guests is presented in a series of camera whirls and reaction shots of the guests. The objective camera perspective changes into a subjective perspective of the dog as he approaches an angry Dracula. The rhythm of the non-diegetic music becomes more alert, which increases the suspense of the scene, the perspective shifts rapidly from Dracula's to Tinkles' and back to a two-shot of their confrontation. Dracula adopts a serious tone and puts on an angry face to show he has the final word and each situation under control:

> *Dracula: Tinkles, sit!*
> *(Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation* script)

No sooner has Dracula's reputation as a figure of authority been reinforced than it shatters to make room for the presentation of some of his flaws. Mavis, his daughter, is no longer a reckless girl as in the first movie, *Hotel Transylvania*, but a responsible parent. Dracula's impulse to hold

someone responsible for taking care of the dog turns against him, as it proves that he is to blame in the first place. His question and Mavis' answer are visually presented simultaneously in split-screen, with Mavis and Dracula in close-up, which brings into focus Dracula's mimicry and sudden shift in attitude:

> Dracula: (angry) Whose idea was it to let Dennis have a puppy?
> Mavis: Hmm, ... yours?
> Dracula: (laughing) Ok.
> (Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation script)

The core of a good story begins when the main character is confronted with a problem s/he must deal with, or forms a goal s/he aims to achieve. Sometimes the goal becomes apparent only after the character is confronted with the problem. Problems can take many forms, but they can be grouped under three main categories: a danger, a want or a mystery. If the character is in danger the viewers are kept in suspense, hoping the character remains safe, yet fearing a negative outcome. When a character lacks something and wants to achieve it, viewers are equally edgy until that want or need is satisfied. If a mystery appears, curiosity drives the viewers' allegiance to the character, simply because we wants to know the answer.

The opening wedding dance, a romantic diegetic song, has both a descriptive function, as its lyrics address loneliness, and a symbolic function in relation to the close-up shot of Dracula's face, expressing sadness. The tragic loss of his wife is an event repeated in each movie in the series, in view of showing Dracula off as a man of feeling and endearing him to the audience, as we are driven into parallel allegiance to him:

> Dracula: Look, guys. I appreciate your concerns,
> but it's... It's not up to me.
> (Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation script)

His meditative mood is cut short by the intervention of Frankenstein's cousin, a gorgeous woman who seemingly has a crush on Dracula and is, literally, able to crush him. The scene is a small hint thrown at the viewers that love can be dangerous. The term used in the movie to express true love is 'zing', but the main character is sure he can never 'zing' again, as he confesses to his friends: 'You only zing once and I did.' Once he learns, however, that a 'zing' is easy to find via the phone, he is caught in a whirl of excitement and tries to connect to that special someone, even if he cannot exactly understand how to use the phone. A series of scenes is dedicated to exposing Dracula's flaws, such as insulting potential perfect matches, lying, pretending, hiding his true actions from Mavis. Now that his lack has been brought to light by his friends- 'You haven't had a date in a hundred years!'- viewers are placed in spatial alignment to him and cannot wait to see him fall in love.

We are glued to Dracula and his group in the hilarious scenes showing their flight to a destination Mavis has chosen. The gradual reveal is visually stunning and gives Dracula room to be grumpy, nagging, ironic, silly, flaws which are soon counterbalanced when Mavis reminds him of the importance of time spent with the ones you love. He takes responsibility for Dennis' safety and tries to be realistic about the perspective of a monster cruise on water:

> Frankenstein: maybe we can find your own fireworks
> on the cruise, huh?
> Dracula: It's not the love boat, Frank.
> I'm just here to have fun with my family.
> (Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation script)

Captain Ericka's appearance alerts the monsters, as well as the viewers, about the effects of love at first sight. Extreme close-ups of Dracula's eyes reflect Ericka's figure and perspectives shift

from close-ups of Dracula's to Ericka's to objective shots of the two engaged in nonsensical dialogue caused by Dracula's loss for words, which Ericka interprets as snatches of Transylvanian language. The moment Dracula wakes up from the love trance is emotionally marked by a close-up of Dracula's face overcome with sadness, and non-diegetic heroic music which underscores his confession:

> *Frankenstein: Hey buddy, you okay?*
> *Dracula: No, no, not okay. Not, okay.*
> *I... I... I... zinged.*
> *(Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation script)*

It is now clear that Dracula has fallen in love with Ericka and she seems interested in knowing him, learning his language, as she declares:

> *So, you must be*
> *the one and only, Dracula.*
> *I have waited*
> *so long to meet you.*
> *Wow, you really don't age do you?*
> *I'd kill for your skin.*
> *(Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation script)*

A few scenes later, as the viewers are placed in alignment to Ericka, the implied threat in her words is revealed. She is Van Helsing's great granddaughter, thirsty for revenge and determined to kill Dracula immediately. The viewers' alignment has shifted, as we follow Ericka and meet the tuned-up Van Helsing who has become half robot to slow down the aging process. As we know more than the main character at this point, suspense is generated when we realise Dracula is in trouble. The character is at a disadvantage, love-struck, and dramatic irony functions to increase humour and tension simultaneously.

Parallel editing is used to endear Dracula to the viewers by showing his dance moves and cheerful spirits in alternation to Ericka's desperate attempts to set deadly traps at every step and corner. The same diegetic music is used to connect the sequences, its rhythm is alert and descriptive of an exciting atmosphere, but it functions ironically in relation to Ericka's plans. The climatic point of each sequence is shot in objective perspective, with happy Dracula in the foreground and frustrated Ericka in the background.

Some external conflict is added when Mavis has a hard time understanding her father's infatuation and criticizes him for breaking his promise to spend time with the family and Dennis. Ericka and Dracula react in similar ways, their reactions are captured in two-shots, indicating that they are a perfect match.

The last stage of establishing Dracula as deserving and worthy of our allegiance is the sequence in which he follows Ericka to find her true intentions and ends up rescuing her from death numerous times. Diegetic music plays the key role in the sequence of Ericka climbing to take the 'family inheritance', as each step Ericka takes is followed by Dracula's until they get to the top in a tango of the lovers. Their return to safety is a suspenseful scene, with tempo and rhythm of non-diegetic music functioning symbolically. Ericka is still alive in Dracula's arms and viewers are eager to see them both safe and happily in love.

Conflict escalates and the monster kraken, under Van Helsing's guidance, nearly kills Dracula. Now that Dracula has found a soul mate, it is time to make viewers root for her, as well. It is the human's turn to save the monster, in a thrilling battle of powers and musical rhythms. Ericka is no longer the antagonist, she belongs to the group of the 'good' ones, while Dracula's last trick to win the viewers' hearts and smiles is to save his enemy's life, and be the ultimate hero: 'Gotta be greater than Hades' *(Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation* script).

3. Conclusion

The movie is fast paced and its appeal mostly lies in slapstick gags. Visual humour is the hook viewers cannot escape, and each character in each scene brings at least smile on our adult faces. The story line has its degree of predictability, but the mini-plots weaved in the main one spice up the story and give room to minor characters to stand out. The sinker of the movie is represented by the complexity of the main character, rooted in the streak of humanity developed in the previous movies and the attributes of a strong, traditional monster, head over heels. Dracula is fascinating, amusing and deserving, which makes viewers eager for more of his 'Blah, blah, blah…' *(Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation* script).

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