

Fighting to Stay Alive (A Film Essay on Vampires, Zombies and Werewolves)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

*"And though you fight to stay alive
Your body starts to shiver
For no mere mortal can resist
The evil of the thriller"*

~Vincent Price

While exploring Ryan Coogler's recent horror flick Sinners (1) set in 1930s Mississippi, one can immediately notice references to Michael Jackson's Thriller (2), a popular mini-musical of the 1980s, showcasing the popstar's 'killer' dance moves as he skillfully leads a troop of zombies in a mesmerizing set of carefully choreographed steps to the beat of the chart-topping Quincy Jones produced melody. While Coogler's setting in the cotton-picking south depicts the spread of vampirism (and not zombies) in a small rural community overrun by the Ku Klux Klan, the growing infected at first attempt to lure their slave victims into a group bonfire dance—akin to MJ's dance in *Thriller*—to the rhythm of popular Irish folk tunes and southern hillbilly anthems. Coogler's cultural clash completes itself when Club Juke run by the Smoke-Stack Twins opens its doors on a fateful summer night and delights its Afro-American attendees with the sounds of blues, jazz and soul music as Jim Crow vampires lurk in the neighbouring countryside.

Released in the same calendar year as Sinners, the sequel to 28 Days Later (3) by British director Danny Boyle, tells a continuation of the zombie apocalypse narrative depicted in the popular original, where a mysterious blood virus contained in a British primate research facility spreads throughout Europe and around the globe. In the original made at the turn of the millennium, the protagonist Jim awakens in a deserted London, England hospital after a mass evacuation has taken place following the outbreak. After meeting a few other non-infected humans such as Selena and the younger Hannah, the small group embarks on a quest to find a safer haven in a Darwinian world where non-zombie survivors of the virus are also prone to using violent means (and militarism) to gain an advantage.

Another probable influence of Coogler's Sinners is from the more modern vampire world depicted in Marvel picture Blade (4) from the late 1990s. In the popular comic book horror film with spurred two other sequels, vampires form a ruling class that live secretly among ordinary humans, who are mere cattle to them. The African-American main character Blade, who possesses some vampire powers along with the ability to suppress his need to drink blood, is engaged in vigilante justice against the powerful fanged enemy, who seek to overthrow humanity and exert total dominion over Los Angeles and planet earth with their cultish rituals and ways.

Going back to the influential cinematic music video Thriller, with its references to popular horror flicks such as “Night of the Living Dead” and “American Werewolf in London”, the narrator Vincent Price recites a famous rap which begins with the lines “darkness falls across the land”. He then continues his poem referencing vampires and zombies with the words “creatures crawl in search of blood” and “grizzly ghouls from every tomb”. The fifteen minute music video then concludes with Michael Jackson’s girlfriend waking up from a bad dream where she is cornered by her undead boyfriend and a group of zombies in a desolate farm house. Without her realizing that her boyfriend MJ is still in fact a nightly ghoul himself, she obviously gets up off the couch to head home with him in the later hours of the night. At this very moment, MJ turns towards the camera revealing a scary glint in his beastly eyes. While the shot freezes and zooms into MJ’s yellowish werecat pupils, the famed horror picture actor Price cackles loudly in his distinctive voice to conclude the horror short on a sinister and quasi humorous note. This scene is echoed slightly at the conclusion of Sinners when the ageless couple Stack and Mary arrive at a pub decades later in the 1980s and meet vampire survivor Sammie “Preacher Boy” who has since aged and become a famous retired blues musician. Much like in Thriller, Stack’s eyes in the pub scene have an eerie coloured glint, to show that he is very much a ghoul who still “crawl[s] in search of blood”, outliving other mere mortals with his vampire lover.

1. Sinners (2025). Dir. Ryan Coogler. Warner Bros. Pictures. USA. 138 min.
2. Michael Jackson’s Thriller (1983). Dir. John Landis. Epic Records. USA. 14 min.
3. 28 Days Later (2002). Dir. Danny Boyle. 20th Century Fox. UK. 113 min.
4. Blade (1998). Dir. Stephen Norrington. New Line Cinema. USA. 120 min.