

# Selling Bela Lugosi, with and without Added Sugar: Vampires and the American Television Commercial

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**Selling Bela Lugosi,  
with and without Added Sugar:  
Vampires and the American Television Commercial**

**Gary D. Rhodes**

During Bela Lugosi's lifetime, he costumed as Dracula. Since Lugosi's death, Dracula has costumed as him. From Lugosi's initial performance as Dracula on Broadway in 1927 to the cape in which he was buried in 1956, he was irrevocably linked to the character. His facial appearance and costume were distinct from Bram Stoker's description of the vampire count in his 1897 novel. Lugosi did not have grey hair; he did not wear a white moustache; he did not dress solely in black "from head to foot." True, Lugosi spoke with what many listeners would call a "strange intonation," to use Stoker's description of Dracula. But there are many timbres of "strange." Lugosi was Hungarian; Stoker's Dracula was not. And it is Lugosi's Dracula that has become the culturally dominant of the two, from the 1920s to the 2020s, even though his image changed slightly during his own lifetime, such as in the lining of his cape becoming red for Charles Barton's film *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948).<sup>1</sup>

Lugosi's prominence as Dracula attests to the power of cinema, the power of his persona, and to the power of mimesis. Those who will dress as Dracula to celebrate Halloween will imitate Lugosi's look and voice, even if they do not know Lugosi by name. Lugosi has been dead for over six decades, but his Dracula is alive and well, thanks to imitations that began during his own lifetime. Indeed, the first documented Lugosi imitation comes inside the running time of Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931), with Mina (Helen Chandler) teasing Lucy (Frances Dade) by repeating Dracula's own words in an approximation of his accent. A related example occurs in Wallace Fox's *The Corpse Vanishes* (1942), which stars Lugosi as Dr. Lorenz, a mad scientist; Elizabeth Russell, portraying his wife, a vampirish "Countess," adopts his accent to sound as if they both hail from the same foreign country.

Imitations of Lugosi's visual appearance became equally common, as in Lou Costello parodying Lugosi's hypnotic hands and the use of his cape in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. Cartoon imitations of Lugosi's Dracula appeared in *Mickey's Gala Premiere* (1933), *Wax Works* (1934), and *G-*

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<sup>1</sup> While *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* is shot in black-and-white, color-tinted publicity materials for the film indicated for audiences that the cape's lining was red.

*Man Jitters* (1939). Lugosi himself participated in the mimesis, playing “Bela Lugosi as Dracula,” a wax figure that comes to life in the short subject *Hollywood on Parade A-8* (1933). But the key examples are those of subsequent screen Draculas, such as John Carradine, Lon Chaney Jr., Frances Lederer, Christopher Lee, Jack Palance, Louis Jourdan, George Hamilton, and Frank Langella, all of whom, even if in varying degrees, appear visually closer to Lugosi’s Dracula than they do to Stoker’s description.<sup>2</sup>

Most of Lugosi’s cultural influence stems from his titular role in Browning’s *Dracula*, more so than, for example, the hundreds of times he played the role onstage. Even though many modern viewers haven’t seen the film, they paradoxically remember it. And while most box-office stars of 1931 are long forgotten, Lugosi’s Dracula endures, thanks to the mimesis that became increasingly common after his death. Beginning in 1957, Gabriel Dell repeatedly performed his Lugosi imitation on *The Steve Allen Show*, speaking in a Lugosian voice while wearing a Lugosian costume. Lenny Bruce began impersonating Lugosi’s accent in his act at roughly the same time, as would his drummer, Philly Joe Jones. For pop songs like Zacherle’s “Dinner with Drac” (1958) and Bobby “Boris” Pickett’s “Monster Mash” (1962), singers imitated Lugosi’s Dracula. And such vocal parodies weren’t limited to adult entertainment, as the Bugs Bunny cartoon *Transylvania 6-5000* (1963) illustrates.<sup>3</sup>

Such mimesis was intended to be humorous, even though the overwhelming number of Lugosi’s own vampire appearances on stage and screen were serious in tone. The reasons were two-fold. For one, most imitations of American celebrities in the twentieth century were comical in approach. For another, particularly from the late 1950s through the 1970s, a period sometimes referred to as the “Monster Kid” generation, the treatment of the Universal Monsters was often humorous, a curious

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<sup>2</sup> My reference here would be to Lon Chaney, Jr. in *Son of Dracula* (Robert Siodmak, 1943); John Carradine in *House of Frankenstein* (Erle C. Kenton, 1944), *House of Dracula* (Erle C. Kenton, 1945), and *Billy the Kid Versus Dracula* (William Beaudine, 1966); Francis Lederer in *The Return of Dracula* (Paul Landres, 1958); Jack Palance in *Dracula* (Dan Curtis, 1974); Louis Jourdan in *Count Dracula* (Philip Saville, 1977); George Hamilton in *Love at First Bite* (Stan Dragoti, 1979), and Frank Langella in *Dracula* (John Badham, 1979). I would suggest the same of most, though not all, of Christopher Lee’s screen appearances as Dracula, particularly in *Horror of Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958), *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* (Terence Fisher, 1966), *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave* (Freddie Francis, 1968), *Scars of Dracula* (Roy Ward Baker, 1970), *Taste the Blood of Dracula* (Peter Sasdy, 1970), *Dracula A.D. 1972* (Alan Gibson, 1972), *The Satanic Rites of Dracula* (1973). By contrast, Lee does not show the Lugosi influence in the film *Count Dracula* (Jesús Franco, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Ben Frommer adopted a Lugosian accent to voice Count Bloodcount. Frommer had earlier appeared in the Lugosi films *Bride of the Monster* (1955) and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1958), both directed by Ed Wood.

tempering of their original, intended seriousness.<sup>4</sup> Here was the world of television horror hosts making fun of horror movies, even inserting themselves into them by superimposition, beginning with *Shock Theater* in 1957. Here was the world of puns regarding horror movies that populated so many pages of Forrest J. Ackerman's magazine *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, from its first issue in 1958 until its last in 1983.<sup>5</sup> Here was the world of television programs like *The Addams Family* (1964-1966) and *The Munsters* (1964-1966).<sup>6</sup> And here was a world in which Boris Karloff became known affectionately as "Uncle Boris," and in which Lugosi became more popular in death than he had been during the final decade of his life.

Indeed, the Lugosi-Dracula persona not only continued after his death, but it also evolved, with impressionists adding nonsense words that he never said in any stage play, film, radio program, or television show: "*blah, blah, blah*," or perhaps, depending on the enunciation, "*bleh, bleh, bleh*." The origins of the phrase likely stem from Allan Sherman's song "My Son, the Vampire," released as a single in 1963, as well as becoming the theme to a Lugosi film of the same name, the American release of his British-made *Mother Riley Meets the Vampire* (1952), directed by John Gilling. During the song, Sherman repeatedly shouts the word "blood" in a Lugosi accent, with the letter "d" not clearly enunciated. As a result, the Lugosi lexicon grew notably and noticeably. "*Bleh*," the only word that the vampire in the Pink Panther cartoon *Pink Plasma* (1975) says, for example, with animator and voice actor Art Leonardi repeating it in a Lugosian accent.

The proliferation of fun and sometimes funny Lugosi imitations in the five years after his death came parallel to the rise of Lugosi merchandising, most famously embodied by the Dracula model kit released by Aurora in 1962 (figure 1), but also present in numerous other products, from lunch boxes and rubber masks to board games and playing cards. Here was commercial success, enough so that Lugosi's son Bela G. Lugosi sued Universal Pictures over the licensing rights to his father's image. Legal action led to more than one lawsuit and outcome, but eventually Lugosi's son proved victorious.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> With regard to the term "Monster Kid" in popular culture, see Bob Burns with Tom Weaver, *Bob Burns' Monster Kid Memories* (Albany, Georgia: BearManor Media, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> The "Monster Kid" era, particularly its tempering of horror with comedy, deserves a monograph to explore these matters in-depth.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that *The Addams Family* began in the form of Charles Addams' print cartoons, as published in *The New Yorker* magazine from 1938 to 1964.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on these lawsuits, see Jane M. Gaines, *Contested Culture: The Image, the Voice and the Law* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). The sheer complexities of these lawsuits and their aftermath deserve another monograph, one that could examine the history since 1991. For the sake of full disclosure,

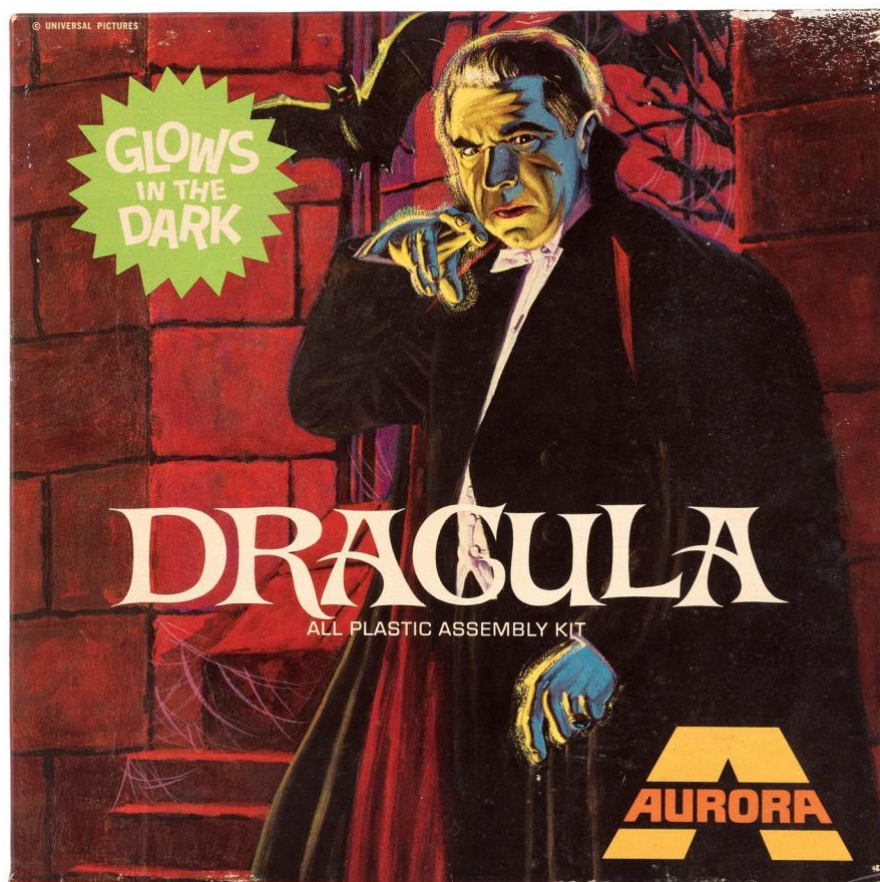


Figure 1. Cover image for the Dracula model kit released by Aurora in 1962 (Universal Pictures / Aurora Plastics Corp.).

From the 1990s to the present, Universal has continued to license its Dracula for numerous products, though sometimes without the involvement of the Lugosi family's business, Lugosi Enterprises. The Draculas on such products simultaneously do and do not look like Lugosi. They are distinct enough from his now-trademarked facial appearance to avoid litigation, meaning they do not use the trademarked name "Bela Lugosi" and they are not photo-realistic depictions of Lugosi. Nevertheless, in terms of costume and hairstyle, they evoke Lugosi's Dracula rather than, say, Stoker's.<sup>8</sup>

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I should note that I have been friends with Bela G. Lugosi since 1985, and that I have provided much historical information for the Lugosi Enterprises website, [www.belalugosi.com](http://www.belalugosi.com).

<sup>8</sup> One curious example would be Hasbro's 12-inch doll Son of Dracula, released in 1997 as part of its group of Universal Monsters. The same group did not have a Dracula. The toy company relied on licenses from Universal, the studio who made *Son of Dracula*, and from the Lon Chaney, Jr. estate.

The result is akin to Helen Chandler's imitation of Lugosi in Browning's *Dracula*, or to Gabriel Dell on the late-night TV, meaning that a Dracula can simultaneously be close to and distant from Lugosi. A Halloween decoration might appear very similar to Lugosi, but not enough to provoke a lawsuit. Christopher Lee's Dracula might be different than Lugosi's, in part because he is a different actor, but his Dracula is visually part of the Lugosi lineage, something that he might have even realized, at least to a degree, as in most of his Dracula films he knowingly wore a duplicate of the ring that Lugosi wore in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. Legally and culturally, Lugosi's Dracula resides somewhere between Lugosi and "Lugosi," between what is an original and what is an imitation, between what is a duplicate and what is a parody.

Consider Count von Count, the popular Muppet that has appeared on *Sesame Street* since 1972. As voiced first by Jerry Nelson and then by Matt Vogel, Count von Count sounds like Lugosi, an approximation of Lugosi's accent that does not infringe on existing trademarks.<sup>9</sup> He also looks like Lugosi, meaning the slicked-back hair with widow's peak, pronounced eyebrows, and evening dress with cape. But he doesn't look like Lugosi, meaning he is short and purple and only has four fingers on each hand. He also wears a monocle.<sup>10</sup> And then there is the fact



Figure 2. Artist's rendering of Lugosi with fangs in the one-sheet for Ed Wood's *Bride of the Monster* (1955).

<sup>9</sup> "Count von Count Puppet," Smithsonian National Museum of American History. Accessed February 11, 2022. Available at: [https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\\_1444767](https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1444767).

<sup>10</sup> In Browning's *Dracula*, Lugosi did have a monocle as part of his costume, but he did not wear it.



that he evokes Lugosi through a common misconception. Count von Count has sharp fangs, which Lugosi did not use in any of his Dracula appearances onstage or in film. That said, audiences presumed he had sharp teeth, including the artist who drew the poster artwork for Ed Wood's *Bride of the Monster* (1955), which depicts Lugosi with canines like those later worn by Count von Count (figure 2). For film historians, Lugosi's Dracula didn't wear fangs; in popular memory, he did, a fact that has so often aided product sponsors who want us to bite into their tasty food products. The complicated result means that arguably the more different that Count von Count is from Lugosi, the more like "Lugosi" he becomes.

Lugosi's Dracula sells, whether he is Lugosi or "Lugosi." And by the 1970s, Lugosi's Dracula could sell products of himself. His identity, his iconic status, became such that—like so many famous film, television, music, and sports stars over the decades—he could sell other products, his endorsement carrying cultural weight. If Dracula uses it, why shouldn't I? If Dracula likes it, then I should as well. And if he looks different from Lugosi, he might still look very much like him, so that I know this really is Dracula, even if it is not: hence, the Dracula television commercial in the United States, imitating Lugosi, with a pronounced emphasis on consuming, if not blood, then our choice of a fine array of other products. "Lugosi" is a hypertextually significant cultural presence, including as an ongoing marketing strategy, one featuring as much or more comedy as horror.

Viewers and critics usually dislike commercials, though at times they heap praise upon them, including some of those produced for the Super Bowl. It is evident that an important and ongoing dialogue between the cinema and television commercials began in the fifties and continues to the present day, each aesthetically informing the other. In the book *Consuming Images: Film Art and the American Television Commercial* (2020), Robert Singer and I argue that TV commercials are short films, some of them qualifying as examples of important cinema.

The power of TV commercials is manifold, given the sheer number of times that even a single audience member might see them. Unlike films and television programs, which many viewers watch only once, an individual commercial can be not only repetitive, but also relentless. The result might at times be unwelcome or irritating, but audience hatred of commercials does not necessarily dispel their ability to sell products, or, for that matter, to introduce new film aesthetics. For example, more American viewers were exposed to the Steadicam shot in the late seventies by TV commercials than by feature films; the same was true of the "Bullet Time" shot in the late nineties (Rhodes and Singer, 2020).

The first discussion of vampire commercials in the industry did not have to do with characters rising from the grave or sucking blood ("How to

Kill a TV ‘Vampire’” 1961, 42). In the early 1960s, “vampire videos” were commercials that did not maintain strict focus on the product being sponsored, the vampires being those “components that suck strength away from the main story” (Untitled article in *Sponsor* 1961, 51). To “split” the viewer’s attention between audio and video meant that “either can work as a ‘vampire’ against [the] other’s strength” (“Beware of ‘Vampires’ in These Commercial Productions” 1961, 43). Offbeat costumes, production “gimmicks,” and some film techniques (such as animation and wipes) could also be detractive, “in vampire fashion” (“Beware of ‘Vampires’ ...” 1961, 43).

And now for a few words from our sponsor, who initially considered Mean Joe Greene or Cindy Crawford to promote a given product, but who decided instead on the Undead. On a small number of occasions, the selected vampire has not been Dracula. For example, in 1980, the Kenyon & Eckhardt agency produced a television commercial for Pils Beer featuring Donald Pleasance. One of its images recreated Count Orlok’s shadow on a wall from F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922), his claw-like hand reaching for a bottle of beer. Fascinating, perhaps, to horror film buffs, but a critic in *Advertising Age* didn’t recognize the image, mistakenly referring to Orlok as a “hag” (“Pils’ Bizarre Appeal 1980, S20). *Nosferatu* had its place in popular culture, increasingly so thanks to Werner Herzog’s remake, *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979), and—in terms of Orlok’s visual appearance—Tobe Hooper’s *Salem’s Lot* (1979). But despite dating to the 1920s, Orlok was not yet an icon of American pop culture, certainly not to the degree he became in the decades that followed from various types of exposure, including E. Elias Merhige’s *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000) and animated imitations on *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999-present).

A small number of other non-Dracula vampires have also appeared in American television commercials. *Vampire Decision Engine*, a 2009 commercial promoting Bing, features a long-haired, trendy vampire who looks as if he could be a costar in Neil Jordan’s *Interview with a Vampire* (1994). And the unshaven vampire in two Nissan Murano ads from 2017 resembles the undead depicted in the *Twilight* film series (2008-2012).<sup>11</sup> Similar examples include a Ray-Ban commercial from 1988 (in which a hip male vampire dies at sunrise because he forgot his sunglasses), a 2000 commercial for Sony DVD players (in which a hip male vampire explodes because of the clarity of a sunrise played on his DVD), and an Audi commercial from 2012

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<sup>11</sup> These two commercials are generally known as *Dracula and Nails* and *Dracula and a Girl*.



(in which the “daylight” power of a hip male vampire’s headlights accidentally kill all of the vampires at an nighttime party).<sup>12</sup>

By contrast, most American vampire commercials have overtly drawn upon Lugosi’s Dracula, sometimes to the extent of recreating audiovisuals associated with the Browning film. A 1987 commercial for Schlage Security Systems mimics Dracula’s attack on Lucy, her asleep in bed, him appearing at the window as a bat before transforming into human form. In this recreation—which features a woman with short hair not unlike Frances Dade, who played Lucy in the Browning film—Dracula’s entry is comically halted by a security system. Five years later, a 1992 commercial features Dracula invading a spooky old castle to bite a woman who successfully entices him to sink his fangs into a can of Coca-Cola instead. The story’s background music is the theme from Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*, which is heard during the opening credits of the Browning’s *Dracula* and long associated with Lugosi, to the extent that it was subsequently heard Tim Burton’s *Ed Wood* (1994), in which Martin Landau played Lugosi, and in Gary D. Rhodes’ documentary film *Lugosi: Hollywood’s Dracula* (1999).

To further their connection to Lugosi (rather than to, say, Christopher Lee), the Schlage and Coke commercials are black-and-white rather than color, thus strengthening their direct link to the Browning film. The same is true of a 2002 commercial for Hostess Cupcakes and its Lugosian vampire. A 2006 vampire commercial for DiGiorno Pizza is also in black-and-white; it features a female victim who resembles Mina (Helen Chandler) in the Browning film. And then there is a battery commercial from 1993, in which a Lugosian Dracula attempts to catch the Energizer Bunny. Its first nine shots (constituting approximately twenty of its thirty seconds) are predominantly black-and-white, with limited color tinting present in the form of blue lightning and the pink bunny.

The narratives in these commercials vary, but only to an extent. Either Dracula dislikes the product (as in the DiGiorno Pizza ad, because garlic is among the ingredients), or he prefers the product over the blood of would-be victims. That is the case in the 2002 Hostess commercial, as well as in *Drinkula*, a 2017 commercial in which Dracula selects Dr. Pepper instead of blood. These are in addition to *Vampire Boyfriend*, a 2015

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<sup>12</sup> A 2009 commercial for Delissio Garlic Bread features a teenager who looks like a goth rock musician, but who turns out to be an actual vampire. However, this commercial seems only to have aired in Canada. The company’s product manager noted that the ad was inspired by *Twilight*. See Matt Semansky, “Delissio Touts the Multiple Advantages of Garlic” in *Marketing* (June 3, 2009) <http://marketingmag.ca/brands/delissio-touts-the-multiple-advantages-of-garlic-8997/>.

commercial for Doritos.<sup>13</sup> In it, an overweight but still Lugosian vampire keeps trying to bite his partner, or so we believe. At its conclusion, she invites him to sit beside her on the sofa, playfully calling him “Nibbles.” He goes not for her neck, but for a bag of the corn chips.<sup>14</sup> This “Lugosi” is as familiar as he is funny.

Other commercial storylines humorously involve sunlight. In 1986, Texas Instruments aired an ad for the Anylite Solar Calculator that featured a Lugosian Dracula in his coffin operating the device with artificial light, rather than relying on the sun. A Kellogg Fruit Crunch Bar commercial of 2013 features Dracula and family, who hate mornings until trying the product; “Now we love mornings,” Dracula explains, despite the sun. By contrast, in the aforementioned Energizer commercial, Dracula gets locked out of his castle while pursuing the bunny, the morning sun destroying him. And in a 2008 commercial for Sunny D (aka Sunny Delight), Dracula tries to hypnotize a bottle of the orange drink, but it manages to destroy him with its sunny rays.

As with Universal’s Dracula merchandising, created without the permission of Lugosi Enterprises, these TV commercial Draculas resemble Lugosi in the macro, not the micro. They look and/or sound like Lugosi, but not exactly so, the actors’ faces being different than Lugosi’s; thus, the imitations avoid lawsuits because they are not photorealistic and therefore do not infringe on the trademark. Nowhere is this more evident than in the aforementioned Coca-Cola commercial, the company feeling obliged to offer the following text onscreen: “Dracula used with permission of Universal City Studios, Inc.” But Lugosi Enterprises is not credited, the image and voice existing outside a trademark infringement. All of this makes the commercial’s slogan, “Can’t Beat the Real Thing,” simultaneously true and false.

The Draculas in a 1977 Post Alpha-Bits cereal commercial, a 1982 commercial for the video game Electronic Dracula, a 1990 Pepsi

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<sup>13</sup> Much the same is true of a 1993 commercial for Kellogg’s Crunchy Nut Cornflakes, in which Dracula arrives at a would-be victim’s window in the form of a bat before transforming back to his human appearance. He first intends to bite a woman’s neck, but he is distracted by the cornflakes. This commercial aired in the United Kingdom. And in a 1999 Canadian commercial for the Dairy Bureau, Dracula prefers a cheese casserole to Mina. Not dissimilar is a 2004 commercial for Chips Ahoy! cookies broadcast in Canada. A Lugosian Dracula bites a woman who has been eating the cookies, leading him to remark on how much chocolate they contain.

<sup>14</sup> In a 1983 commercial for Wattie’s Tomato Sauce, a scared woman runs through an old castle on a dark, stormy night while Bach’s *Tocatta and Fugue* plays in the background. When Dracula confronts her, she apologizes for having let the servants do the shopping. They purchased a tomato sauce other than Wattie’s, which leaves Dracula disgusted. This commercial aired in New Zealand.

commercial, and a 2020 commercial for the Kit Kat candy bar are clearly Lugosian in appearance and voice, but also not enough to provoke legal action. A 1981 commercial for Hasbro's game *I Vant to Bite Your Finger* features a voice that sounds like Lugosi, even though the face used in the game is quite different from his; the same is true of the vampire in a 2021 commercial for Realtor.com. The title character in *Dracula's Blood Drive*, a 2013 commercial for the insurance company GEICO, parodies Lugosi's appearance and voice, but his hair is longer in the back than Lugosi's. Even more curious is the vampire in the aforementioned DiGiorno commercial. He sounds like Lugosi's Dracula and dresses like him, but he is also bald and rises completely erect from his coffin, the result being an amalgam of a Lugosi's Dracula and Count Orlok.

With regard to the issue of legal rights, one of the more curious Lugosi-inspired commercials is perhaps one for Duracell batteries aired in 1988. Here again is the spooky old castle on a dark, stormy night. *Dies Irae* plays in the background. The coffin lid rises, and Dracula emerges. It is not a human actor. Nor is it an animated cartoon. Instead, it is a prop that resembles Count von Count of *Sesame Street*. He is short and purple. But it is not Count von Count. He wears no monocle. And rather than being made of foam, like a Muppet, he appears to be plastic. He is Lugosi refracted through Count von Count into a legally permissible but still recognizable variation of Count von Count.

But nowhere are the issues of Lugosi/not-Lugosi more present in the history of television commercials than in those featuring Count Chocula (figure 3). In 1969, General Mills asked the advertising agency Dancer Fitzgerald Sample to generate ideas for its new chocolate and strawberry

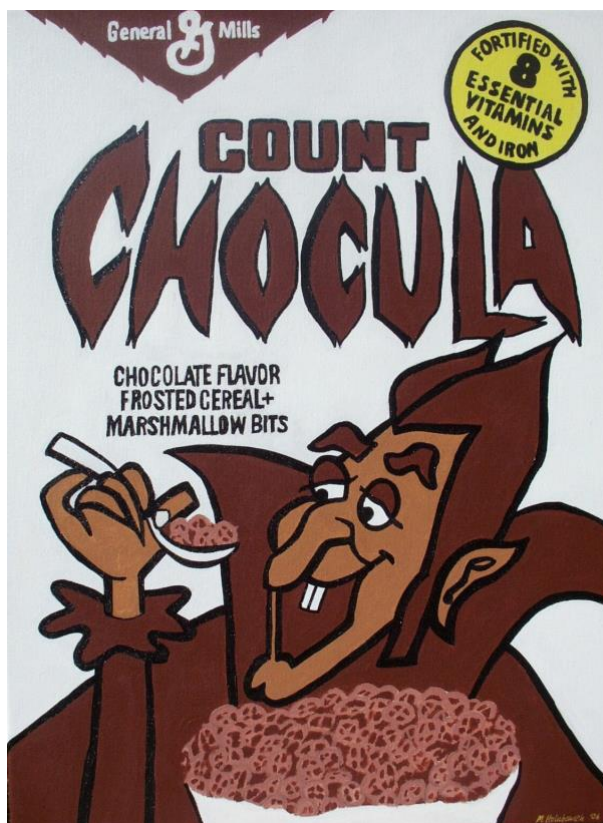


Figure 3. Original Count Chocula cereal box image (1971, General Mills).

flavored cereals. Copywriter Laura Levine created Count Chocula and the Boris Karloff-as-Frankenstein Monster-inspired Franken Berry. George Carn drew the first Count Chocula artwork (“Monsters,” n.d.). Thanks to various animators (one of them Bill Melendez, best known for his work on films featuring Charlie Brown and the Peanuts characters) brought the two monster characters to life for a 1971 television commercial (Rossen 2016).

Levine later recalled, “The whole concept was monsters, but monsters who were scaredy cats. They’d act tough, and then they’d be terrified by the sight of a little kitten” (Rossen, 2016). The idea was original for a breakfast cereal, but one that had appeared in various prior feature films and animated cartoons. Lugosi himself played such a role in Phil Rosen’s horror-comedy *Spooks Run Wild* (1941). The film positions his character as a Dracula-inspired monster stalking the countryside, but he is just a red-herring, one easily frightened by his costars, the youthful East Side Kids.

“Don’t be scared,” Count Chocula says at the beginning of a 1971 television commercial, the first in which he appeared. He emerges from a cardboard box that contains packages of the cereal, the flaps of its lid squeaking like a coffin. His appearance is Lugosian, with cape and evening dress, though they are brown, like his hair, to evoke chocolate. He has a widow’s peak similar to Lugosi in the Browning film, but his hair extends upwards into what look like two horns. He has fangs, but he makes clear that he is a “super sweet monster with the new super sweet cereal.” His fangs are thus sweet teeth, biting breakfast chocolate rather than human necks.

Overall, the caricature is visually further from Lugosi than Count von Count. And yet, as General Mills’ blog indicates, Count Chocula was a “take-off of Bela Lugosi’s Dracula portrayal in 1930s movies” (Olmstead 2015). Larry Kenney, who has voiced Count Chocula for decades, explained, “I was told at auditions that he needed to be funny and not scary, so I added more highs and lows. Lugosi was always low and very scary” (Olmstead 2015). The voice was simultaneously Lugosi and not Lugosi. The overall character was a “take-off” that has not infringed on anyone’s trademark.

Franken Berry appears in the same first Count Chocula commercial, his voice being an imitation of Boris Karloff’s. The two argue over whose cereal is better, their adversarial relationship subtly invoking that of Karloff and Lugosi in the films they made together, such as Edgar G. Ulmer’s *The Black Cat* (1934), Louis Friedlander’s *The Raven* (1935), Lambert Hillyer’s *The Invisible Ray* (1936), and Robert Wise’s *The Body Snatcher* (1945). It also subtly invokes the professional rivalry attributed to the actors by some monster fanzines and books in the 1960s and 1970s.

Subsequent commercials continued to depict arguments between Count Chocula and Franken Berry, but they also add the element that Levine

intended: the monsters become frightened when a third character unexpectedly appears, even though said character normally announces that he or she enjoys both of their cereals. Consider, for example, a 1978 commercial in which the two monsters bicker at a wishing well. A frog emerges to endorse both cereals equally, but his presence causes the duo to jump into the well in order to escape. The approach aligns clearly with the strategy employed during the “Monster Kid” generation, making monsters as friendly and/or comical as they were horrifying.

The commercials repeatedly relied on this narrative, as in one from 1977, in which a cuckoo from a grandfather clock scares the duo into hiding, as well as one from 1979 that has the two arguing over which scary movie to watch on TV; the TV aerial turns out to be the ears of a bunny, with both monsters escaping in a bed that folds upwards, Murphy-style.<sup>15</sup> In other commercials, the two manage to frighten themselves, as in a 1980 commercial, in which the sound of a closing drawbridge scares them, and in a 1981 commercial, in which a collapsing pool table causes them to shiver, and in a 1982 commercial, in which Franken Berry knocks over a Gramophone speaker, its noise scaring them into hiding behind a curtain.<sup>16</sup>

Count Chocula commercials have occasionally varied from this format. A 1979 commercial featured Count Chocula and Boo Berry, a blueberry character introduced in 1972 as a ghostly imitation of Peter Lorre. The two argue inside a bell tower. Various other commercials included Count Chocula, Franken Berry, and a third character, whether Boo Berry in more than one 1972 commercial, Fruit Bruit (a werewolf character) in more than one 1973 commercial, and Yummy Mummy (aka Fruity Yummy Mummy) in a 1988 commercial. And in some commercials, the punchline conclusion of monsters becoming frightened does not appear, thus allowing time within thirty seconds for General Mills to promote toys temporarily included inside the cereal boxes.<sup>17</sup>

Count Chocula appeared in commercials by himself on some occasions, his appearance changing slightly during the 1980s and 1990s, his facial features appearing more exaggerated and his movements more fluid, the apparent result of efforts to modernize the character. But such evolutions at times looked backwards to Lugosi. In a 1984 commercial,

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<sup>15</sup> Another example is a 1982 commercial in which Count Chocula and Franken Berry are aboard a pirate ship, with a talking parrot scaring them.

<sup>16</sup> Another example is a 1981 commercial in which an old automobile collapses, its sound frightening Count Chocula and Franken Berry.

<sup>17</sup> Examples include a 1972 commercial that promoted “Monster Action Rings,” a 1973 commercial that promoted “Monster Mystery Riddles,” and 1981 commercial that promoted “Spooky Speedsters.”

animators gave Count Chocula hypnotic hand gestures that make the cereal's marshmallows float. Lugosi's Dracula in Browning's *Dracula* and in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* had famously used similar gestures. And yet the hand gesture itself was not a legal liability: it is not part of the trademarks held by Lugosi Enterprises.

On two other occasions, commercials for General Mills' monster cereals overtly conjured the Universal horror movies of the thirties and forties that inspired them. In circa 1988, one spot featured text and editing akin to horror movie trailers, featuring large, spooky onscreen text (echoed with voiceover) pronouncing, "They're Enormous," "They're Humongous," and "They're a Scream," to promote the inclusion of large marshmallows ("Monstermallows"). Images of children enjoying their breakfast are in black-and-white, though the cereal and cereal boxes in the same shots appear in color. Intercut are black-and-white clips of Lugosi from Browning's *Dracula*, Karloff from Karl Freund's *The Mummy* (1932) and James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), and Elsa Lanchester from *Bride of Frankenstein*.

Even more notable is a 1987 commercial that promotes Count Chocula. A little girl appears in black-and-white, enjoying the cereal. Pictured in color, Count Chocula is happy with her choice, but he becomes puzzled when a bat flies into the room. The commercial cuts to an image of Lugosi from Browning's film. "The real Dracula!", the little girl exclaims. The notion scares Count Chocula. The little girl is then superimposed onto footage of Lugosi approaching a table, another excerpt from Browning's film. Yet another image of her superimposed onto Browning footage shows Lugosi with milk instead of a wine bottle. Here is the original Lugosi Dracula and his animated imitation, in the same commercial, the juxtaposition bringing differences and similarities into sharp relief.

And the similarities are greater than expected, as the Lugosian voice emanating from Lugosi is not Lugosi's, but rather another Lugosi imitator, reading lines for him that suit the commercial's narrative and the general remit of making monsters acceptable for children. "Good morning," he says (rather than "Good evening," since this is a breakfast food), as well as asking "May I have some?" His final dialogue announces, "I'll sink my teeth into ... the delicious chocolatey marshmallows in Count Chocula's cereal." The specific words suggest the fangs wrongly attributed to Lugosi's Dracula. The pause echoes the pause in Lugosi's dialogue "I never drink ... wine," words he spoke in the very scene from the Browning film clipped for this commercial.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This 1987 commercial was not the only connection between Lugosi's Dracula and Count Chocula that year. Computerized artwork of Lugosi's trademarked image also appeared on boxes of the cereal, which resulted in a controversy due to the medallion he wears. It features six points, which some persons took to be an inappropriate use of the Star of

The most notable visual transformation that Count Chocula underwent occurred in a 1991 commercial that featured no animation, but instead a live-action actor in a mask. His eyes blink, but his face is otherwise motionless. The reincarnation proved unpopular and was not repeated. It was similar to the original animated Count Chocula, but neither close enough nor far enough away to prove successful. Rather, the breakfast cereal vampire had fallen into something of an uncanny valley, one that worked much better as parody. In 2020, comedian Pete Davidson played a live-action Count Chocula for a sketch on *Saturday Night Live*.<sup>19</sup> Davidson's version was meant to be comedic; his makeup and costume are curiously closer to the animated Count Chocula than the actor in the 1991 commercial.

In terms of sheer numbers of commercials as well as popularity, Count Chocula has been the most notable vampire to appear in American television commercials. In 2018, General Mills requested help from film industry professionals to develop a feature-length film based on Count Chocula, Franken Berry, and the company's other "legacy" monster characters.<sup>20</sup> Such a film would help sell cereal, in the manner that so many blockbuster movies sell ancillary products. As of 2022, no such film has gone into production, but companies like Retro-A-Go-Go! continue to sell Count Chocula products, including "collectible" patches, pins, and wall décor.<sup>21</sup> The products bear trademark information, which belongs to General Mills.<sup>22</sup>

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David. See Caroline E. Mayer, "Necklace Chokes Count Dracula: General Mills Pulls Box Design with 6-Pointed Star," *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 1987. Accessed February 9, 2022. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-10-19-fi-10380-story.html>.

<sup>19</sup> See Cassie Gill, "Dave Chappelle & Pete Davidson Break Character & Laugh During Aunt Jemima Skit on SNL," *Hollywood Life*, November 8, 2020. Accessed February 9, 2022. Available at: <https://hollywoodlife.com/2020/11/08/snl-pete-davidson-laughs-count-chocula-aunt-jemima-sketch-video/>.

<sup>20</sup> See Amid Amidi, "General Mills Wants to Make Movie Stars Out of Count Chocula, Franken Berry, and Boo Berry," *Cartoon Brew*. Accessed February 9, 2022. Available at: <https://www.cartoonbrew.com/feature-film/general-mills-wants-to-make-movie-stars-out-of-count-chocula-franken-berry-and-boo-berry-166735.html>.

<sup>21</sup> These products appear on Retro-A-Go-Go!'s website, as accessed on February 11, 2022. Available at: <https://www.retroagogo.com/categories/brands/general-mills/>.

<sup>22</sup> Some links to the General Mills website in the references list below may have been updated, removed or changed. The website does (currently) feature an article by Hanna Johnson entitled "The History of Our Monsters" (August 1, 2021), along with related links to information and stories about them at

<https://www.generalmills.com/news/stories/the-history-of-our-monsters>.



Retro-A-Go-Go! also sells various Lugosi products, all bearing the trademark of Lugosi Enterprises.<sup>23</sup> Lugosi products are available from other companies as well, among them T-shirts, hoodies, socks, blankets, stickers, lunch boxes, masks, models, statuettes, dolls, action figures, bobbleheads, replica movie posters, and replica props. Currently, the most expensive Lugosi doll sells for \$399.99 retail; the least expensive for under twenty dollars: priced to fit any budget, and all “officially licensed.” By contrast, many of the current Universal Monsters products either avoid showing Dracula, or he’s present as “Lugosi,” not as Lugosi.

Lugosi’s Dracula sells. He sells himself, and, with arguably greater success, he sells others. It doesn’t matter that he died in 1956. It doesn’t matter that so many people don’t know his name. Customers buy, at the request of Lugosi or “Lugosi.” They consume. Rather than being “vampire videos” that suck attention away from given products, these commercials and their mimetic depictions of Lugosi’s Dracula entice customers to sink their teeth into them, figuratively and at times literally. In commercials for Kit Kat aired in 2020 and 2021, the Lugosian Dracula wants to eat the chocolate bars, he wants to bite them, and thus so do we.

“Lugosi” also continues to evolve, just as he has over the decades with red-lined capes, sharp fangs, and “*bleh, bleh, bleh.*” Indeed, “Lugosi” became friendly and funny thanks to the many parodies and imitations that became commonplace from the late 1950s to the present day. Such evolutions may well keep Lugosi’s Dracula alive (undead?) and well and available for future product endorsements. Consider the vampire that has appeared on Spectrum TV’s monster commercials since 2017. “When I bite you,” he explains in a 2022 commercial, “there’s no surprises. You know exactly what you’re going to get.” His remarks speak to repetition, the codes and conventions that we expect of genre, including the vampire genre, and—by extension—the vampire commercial genre. And yet, we don’t *always* know exactly what we’re going to get, given the evolutions that genres undergo. The Spectrum vampire is dressed in a variant Lugosi costume (including the red-lined cape), but he looks like Count Orlok and he speaks with an American voice, no trace of the Lugosi accent.

In the Browning film, Lugosi said “I am Dracula.” In popular culture, “Lugosi” says “I am Draculas.”

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<sup>23</sup> These products appear on Retro-A-Go-Gol’s website, as accessed on February 12, 2022. Available at: <https://www.retroagogo.com/categories/collections/bela-lugosi/>.

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