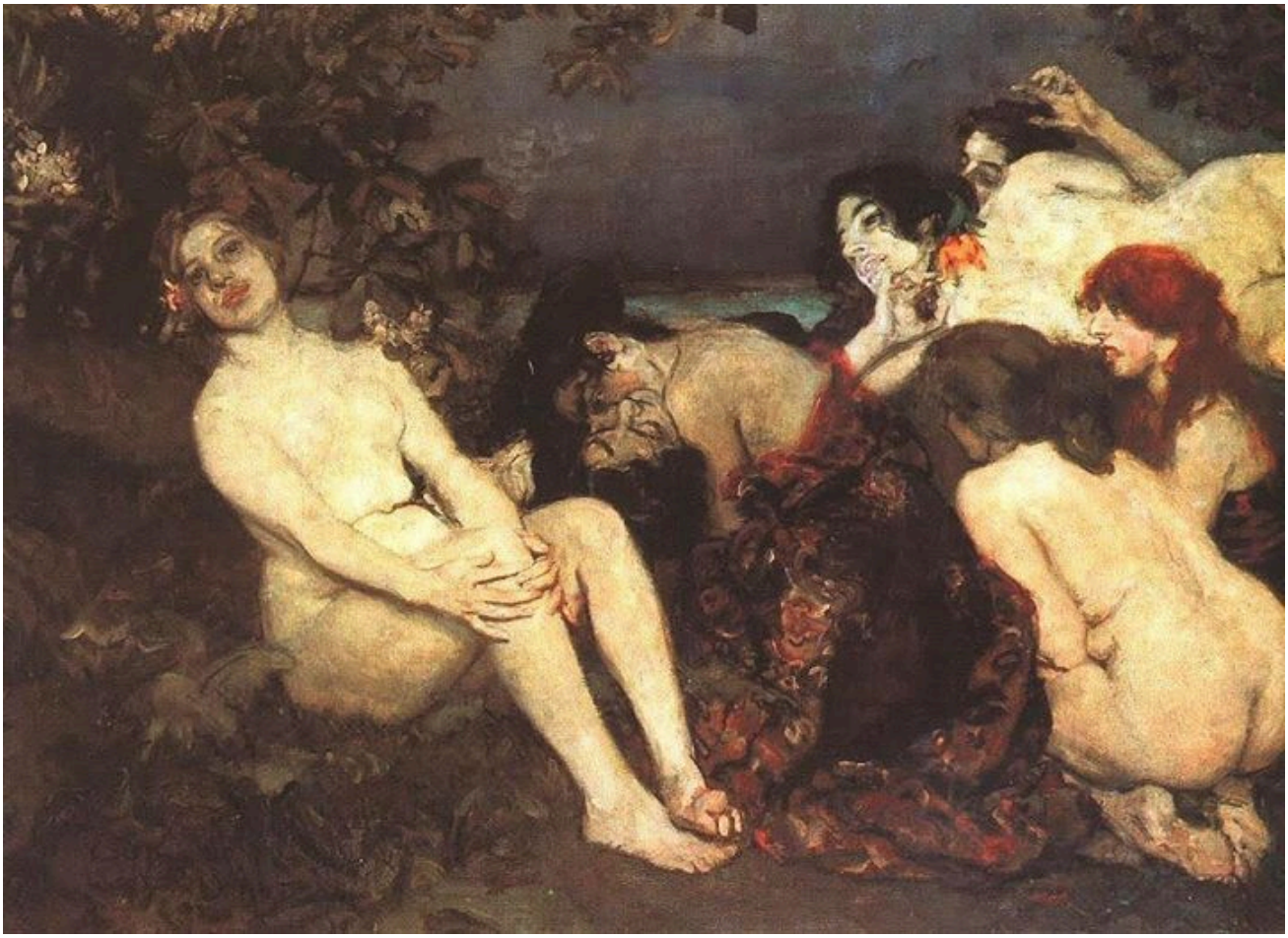
The Inverted Age

by Matthew Wardour (February 2020)



The Vampires, István Csók, 1907

Modern society can be defined by its inversions: inverted snobbery, the elevation of low culture, the inversion of sexual morality, the way we champion notoriety instead of virtue, the way the educated elite now prioritise work over leisure, or wealth over improvement. It does not matter whether you think these are good or bad or neither, but they are an inversion of a previous order, a genuine revolution.

The new is better than the old, the inverted better than the original.

Chesterton, in the opening paragraph of *Heretics,* wrote that it was becoming more fashionable to be heretical, even in 1905:

> *In former days . . . [t]he man was proud of being orthodox, was proud of being right. If he stood alone in a howling wilderness he was more than a man; he was a church. He was the centre of the universe; it was round him that the stars swung. All the tortures torn out of forgotten hells could not make him admit that he was heretical. But a few modern phrases have made him boast of it. He says, with a conscious laugh, "I suppose I am very heretical," and looks round for applause. The word "heresy" not only means no longer being wrong; it practically means being clear-headed and courageous.*

A twenty-first century variation on this theme is the phrase "'be different". There really is no greater virtue in modern life than being "different" (as long as one is the right kind of different). In art this goes hand-in-hand with another of the modern cardinal virtues, being "challenging". Living near London, I am very fortunate in being able to see many operas. I have therefore witnessed many "challenging" opera productions. I have seen rows of half-naked men and women slapping each others' bottoms in a debauched production of *La Traviata*. I have seen a "feminist" production of *Lucia di Lammermoor* which added to the opera a sex scene followed by a violent blood-drenched miscarriage. Memorably, I once sat through a rather embarrassing production (though the rest of the audience seemed not to mind it) of Henry Purcell's *King*

Arthur which was re-imagined as a twenty-first century opera about Brexit. The patriotic drinking song– "And heigh for the honour of Old England!" –became an unsubtle parody of Leave voters. The "Cold Genius", the spirit of winter in the original opera, became a homeless man distressed by Brexit.

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Though I have seen many wonderful operas–when it works, opera is surely the most magical kind of theatre–I am becoming increasingly reluctant to go because of the folly of so many directors who seem to no longer feel any obligation to be faithful to the composer, librettist and the society in which the opera was written. I feel the same way about most television adaptations of great novels. People justify these televisual abominations by saying that it would be impossible to faithfully adapt the novel for the screen. Well, of course that's true. But there is a difference between adapting to a medium and adapting to an era. The former is necessary and good, the latter is often disastrous, sacrificing the past on the altar of the present.

I did, however, watch the BBC's recent three-part adaptation of Bram Stoker 1897 novel *Dracula.* It was a very twenty-first century version of *Dracula*