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The Expressionistic Vampire:
The Recreation of Myth and the Subversion of Form

The end of World War I left an indelible mark on German society and culture. Beyond the holes of the economy, the cracks in society, the rebuilding of a culture was important for both society and the psyche of the German people. When the artists of this new medium, cinema, went back to work, they too practiced a little differently. Expressionism rose out of the ranks of an artistic culture yearning to start refresh, but in that restart came a darker rhetoric, a harder grip to the brush. Realism was cast asunder to make way for a more accurate portrait of the interiority. The tools that Expressionism provided its artists to convey the inner eye was immense and were put to use by two very different filmmakers. *Nosferatu* and *Vampyr* though similar in subject matter, was approached differently by Dreyer and Murnau who employed Expressionism to serve their own function. *Nosferatu*, an earlier film, was more concerned with adaptation in a traditional sense, utilizing Expressionism to successfully translate the themes and ideas of vampirism from page to screen. Yet with *Vampyr*, we have a film move away from the conventions of genre, utilizing Expressionism best to cut its ties from the traditional vampire story, and instead portray a mediation on the mindscape and the notion of uncertainty. Using the same tools, in starkly different ways, *Nosferatu* and *Vampyr* represent two ends of the Expressionistic spectrum. And beyond that, we have Herzog's *Nosferatu the Vampyr*e, a picture made decades later and the true synthesis of Murnau's and Dreyer's diverging perceptions of Expressionism. It is one of the strongest examples of Expressionistic film outside of early cinema and a pillar testament to the flexibility and timelessness of Expressionistic values.

After World War I, there was a pressing need to define German cinema. With Chaplain, Griffith and DeMille all defining American cinema, Germany was full of 'incompetent producers

[who'd] flooded the market with films which proved inferior in quality to the bulk of foreign pictures.'[1] They were also well aware of the 'the influence anti-German films exerted everywhere abroad.'[2] If Germany didn't define their national cinema soon, an opposing hand would do so for them. In art, the Germans were also bent on moving away from the familiar, from the French Impressionists who sought solely in perceiving nature. For the German Expressionists, they found little importance in this. An object had no inherent qualities. What mattered most was the artist's perception of the world around him and that perception was defined by their inner emotions. Capturing emotional realism was of far greater importance than simply recreating the world around them. Liberties could be taken, the brushstrokes exaggerated, the medium contorted depending on what the artist (or character) felt. It is this core philosophy that came to define Expressionism and Expressionistic cinema.

Although Expressionism by its very nature was subverting traditional form, its early instance of it in cinema was not as radical as it would come to be later on. *Nosferatu* reflects a film as interested in subverting form as it is in being a conscious inheritor of past tradition. Let us start at the film's source. Prana Films, the company behind *Nosferatu*, chose Bram Stoker's *Dracula* as the seminal text to work from. Just by the titles, both of which are named after their villains, we notice similarities between the works. Though Henrik Galeen's screenplay differs substantially from Stoker's novel, the movement of the narrative is fully lifted from the book. We have a Harker-like figure in Thomas Hutter who travels from the fictitious town of Wisborg to an exotic country. He is, like in the novel, warned by the local villagers to stay away from the ominous castle high above the hills. And as Count Orlok learns about Ellen, a mimic of Mina Harker, he, like in the book, sets his sights on corrupting her. He makes for Wisborg, while

[1] Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, (Princeton: PUP, 1974), p.35.
[2] Ibid., p.35.

Hutter remains trapped in Orlok's castle. Though Expressionism was the form in which Murnau would visualize *Nosferatu*, from a story perspective there is little influence of Expressionism. Carl Dreyer, however, ten years later would find a way for Expressionism to infiltrate the very narrative of his film.

By the time Dreyer and Christen Jul were writing *Vampyr*, over twenty vampire films had been made, including the aforementioned, *Nosferatu*. Dreyer had very little interest in following treaded footsteps. *Vampyr* is a film that absorbs its source (Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*), yet expresses it in a very way different way. The only aspects in keeping with the source material are as follows: a young girl living with her widow father in a castle, and in danger from a female vampire. That is all. Dreyer is consciously subverting expectation at the very story level. As David Rudkin notes, '[*Vampyr*] represents, in its vampire's gender as well as her location outside the castle, a distinct reversal of genre. In this reversal, inherent in its source, *Vampyr* seems almost intended as an anti-Dracula.'[3] From even the narrative framework, we can see Dreyer consciously motivated to remove his story from the familiar coinage of what a vampire story is, or should be.

Let us look at the protagonists of both films. Though Hutter might ostensibly be perceived as the protagonist of *Nosferatu*, it quickly becomes apparent that he is the far from being the film's central character. Our lead, as predicated in the title, is Count Orlok. When observing him as a character, his desires and motivations are easily identifiable. Hutter drops the necklace of Ellen, which in sets in motion Orlok's film-long urge to travel to Wisborg and claim the damsel for himself. That's it. Everything, from the death-ship to the horde of rats to the bloodsucking, all of it is fueled by that one desire fixed in Orlok's heart. Now take Allan Grey

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[3] David Rudkin, *Vampyr*, (London: Bfi, 2005), p.21.

from *Vampyr*. He first arrives to the chateau with no real reasoning and soon begins exploring his surroundings, which in turn leads to the loose narrative as we know it now. Grey spends much of his time lost, asking questions that provide no concrete answers while only having fleeting agency in the plot after learning that Gisele has been bitten by the vampire. But when the great act of plunging the stake through the vampire's heart arrives, it is not Grey who commits the act, but his servant. Grey, much like his name, is never clearly defined. He is a rough outline of a character, whose ambiguity is left open to allow the viewer to fill in the gaps. In one of the most famous scenes of the film, perhaps all of Dreyer's work, we see this notion fully realized. In the third act, Grey dreams that he lies dead, staring up from his coffin as he is taken to his grave. And as the nails are screwed in and he's lifted and carried to the cemetery, as the dirt is thrown over the coffin, we watch as Grey's helplessly watches this all happen to him. Here, Dreyer has created a most fitting personification of Grey's inability to take control of his own story.

Even from the story stage, we can already recognize the diverging mentalities of Murnau and Dreyer, both in how they approach their source material and central characters. Perhaps because Murnau was working a full ten years before Dreyer, before the proliferation of the vampire genre, we can assume he didn't have as much of an urge to break free from a mold that hadn't fully been established yet. Dreyer, on the other hand, was succeeding a generation of storytellers who had thoroughly explored the genre. His need to distinguish himself was far greater.

Beyond the diverging approaches to character and story, thematically we find semblance between the two films. The theme of vampirism is certainly one of the parallels between both films and one of the key reasons why they can be discussed in the same vein. But even in this

capacity, how they approach vampirism is very much in keeping with Murnau's traditionalist vision and Dreyer's experimental intent. The rules as outlined by Stoker in *Dracula* are reflected almost wholly in *Nosferatu*. We have a vampire who thirsts for blood, fears the sunlight, and of course, feasts off the blood of the living. Additionally, the very image of the ghost galleon docking against a coastal village brings to mind Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*. Murnau is appropriating from a mythos that reaches deep into Germanic heritage to rather innovative effect. The visual design of Orlok is very much in keeping with the horrifying expectations of how a vampire should look. A frightful creature with rat-like teeth, swollen pale skin, a hunched back and razor sharp nails.

Now counter that with Dreyer's recreation of the vampire. For one, Marguerite Chopin, the sole vampire in the film, appears very briefly in the film and is never given the visual clarity of evil as in Murnau's film. The vampire for Dreyer is something of a more internal state than a physical one. As Rudkin notes, for Dreyer, 'the vampire estate could never be a matter of wardrobe and fangs, but a matter of acting.'[4] For a film largely silent, to rely on the internal state to reflect vampirism was surely a bold move, likely one of the main reasons why Dreyer opted for a more abstract atheistic. But it also makes more sense for Dreyer, as *Vampyr* is a film that plays with psychological states and illusions, with dream sequences that blur the line between fiction and reality. Dreyer himself notes, 'I wanted to create a daydream on film, and I wanted to show that the sinister lies not in the things around us but in our own subconscious.'[5] The term vampirism is not normally associated with the subconscious, but in *Vampyr* we see how vampirism can become something like a disease, corrupting not the body, but the mind.

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[4] David Rudkin, *Vampyr*, (London: Bfi, 2005), p.54.
[5] Jean and Dale Drum, *Vampyr DVD* (linear notes), (London: Eureka, 2008), p.20.

From a narrative and thematic standpoint, *Nosferatu* and *Vampyr* are wholly divergent, with many aspects like vampirism appearing similar but when observed closely, actually quite different. But here arrives the most striking point. Though they are vastly dissimilar in structure and content, both are able to employ concepts of Expressionism to full effect. Let us begin with *Nosferatu*. Though *Nosferatu* wasn't taking liberties with narrative, it was making extraordinary innovation in the visual construction. Unlike most directors, who built grand sets to evoke Expressionism, Murnau decided to find the form in the world around him, be it in the rural towns or the landscapes. There is something organic and almost authentic in Murnau's furtherance of this. As legendary German Expressionistic critic Lotte Eisner wrote, 'Never again was so perfect an Expressionism to be attained, and its stylization was achieved without the aid of the least artifice.'[6] There is something to be said in taking an almost documentary-style approach to the shooting locations. How easy would it have been for production designer, Albin Grau, to simply build a set as they had envisioned it. They could have lit it perfectly, textured the walls and furniture precisely as they desired. Instead, Murnau chooses to find the film in the landscape, thus giving the film a semi-documentary quality that perhaps solidifies the authenticity of the horror. One need only to see the ruined castle of *Trenciansky hrad* to understand the effect a strong location can have on atmosphere.

Murnau was also testing the limits of film technology with *Nosferatu*. In order to achieve the day for night effect, he decided to tint the film stock in a bluish hue and takes it one step further by switching to negative during the white forest sequence. Though undeniably unrealistic, Murnau is eliciting effect over authenticity, just like the original Expressionistic doctrine intended. The effect is without question unsettling. Notably, Murnau's expressionistic influence

[6] Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, (Berkeley: UCP, 2008), p.102.

can also be seen in how the film is edited together. Kevin Jackson notes, '[*Nosferatu*] moves swiftly, and is a triumph of fluent, dramatic cross-cutting, worthy of, in no superior to D.W. Griffith. Murnau…deserves equal recognition for his mastery of narrative rhythms.'[7] In Act IV, we learn that both Hutter and Orlok are hurrying to Wisborg to see Ellen, who waits anxiously. Though Hutter is her lover, strange hallucinations have revealed that she is perhaps under the spell of Orlok. There is a particular moment when Ellen rushes out her house saying, 'I must go to him – he's coming.' But who is the 'he' she is referring to? As Jackson notes, 'the ambiguity here is entirely deliberate, and accentuates the occult bond between Ellen and the vampire established in Act II.'[8] Though we learn in the end that it is Hutter who arrives to Ellen, the intercutting prior has achieved its desired effect. On a base level, it furthers tension as we don't know whether the hero or villain will arrive first to the damsel. On a deeper level, it develops a relationship between what might be opposite images to create a synthesis that speaks about the character's unconscious or repressed desires.

Dreyer with *Vampyr* has a very different strategy in mind for his use of Expressionism, however his approach to locations finds similarities with Murnau, as Dreyer also decided on actual locations instead of built-sets. Whereas Murnau searched far and wide across the German landscape for Expressionistic impulse, Dreyer excavated the interior of dilapidated houses and abandoned factories to place his film. The claustrophobia of *Vampyr* is a key facet in the film's uncertain tension. Outside a few scenes, the film is largely set in interiors and it is from within that Dreyer drives the Expressionistic qualities of his film. Grey's excavation through the labyrinth of the chateau feels like an exploration through a mindscape, with the geometry of the halls and walls contorting to his spinning sanity. Whereas most vampire films tend to sulk in the

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[7] Kevin Jackson, *Nosferatu*, (London: Bfi, 2013), p.69.
[8] Ibid., p.29.

darkness, *Vampyr* chooses the opposite approach. As Jean Drum writes, 'The white discomfort in *Vampyr* leaves the viewer feeling somewhat disorientated, less firmly attached to reality as he usually knows it, and sets up an atmosphere that makes easier the willing suspension of disbelief and the acceptance of the bizarre occurrences of the film as real.'[9] And most strikingly, the decision to saturate the frame in white and light doesn't pacify the viewer, but instead has the opposite effect. Drum continues with, 'there is light, yet the usual feeling of safety and confidence that is present when the surroundings are lit is missing.'[10] Much of the unease arises from the extent to which the light infiltrates the image to the point where it becomes unrealistic, soon unnatural, before eventually becoming uncertain. That is precisely the effect Dreyer is intending for *Vampyr*. This isn't the world of the real, but a place where shadows can detach themselves from their owners, where skeletons dance across the walls, where the dead can interact with living on an equal plain. It is a world of extremes, therefore it is only natural to saturate the film as such.

The line between the living and the dead are blurred in *Vampyr* and fuels the very idea that Dreyer is interested in exploring, the idea of uncertainty. In describing Expressionism, Lotte Eisner writes, 'its exponents juggle with vague expressions, strings of words which have little orthodox relationship to each other…this is a language of symbols and metaphors, intentionally obscure.'[11] Uncertainty is a core aspect in Expressionism, and how Dreyer develops it in *Vampyr* warrants closer inspection. There is a stunning example early in the film where Grey is visited in the dead of night by the Lord of Manor. The creaking footsteps and slow turning of the doorknobs are the first hints we get of the Lord's arrival, aspects that would have more in line

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[9] Jean and Dale Drum, *Vampyr DVD* (linear notes), (London: Eureka, 2008), p.28.
[10] Ibid., p.28.
[11] Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, (Berkeley: UCP, 2008), p.10.

with a figure of the otherworld than wellbeing. Grey awakens from the sound and stares in horror for even he suspects a dreadful thing is trying to gain entrance in his room. The Lord enters like an apparition and leaves a certain box on Grey's bed and then leaves. The box ominously reads, 'to be opened after my death.' Scenes later, he is killed. The validity of this entity is called into question, as he neither addresses Grey nor appears to have any physical bearing on the space around him. He enters as quietly as he leaves. Dreyer in this small exchange has blurred the very line between the living and the dead. As Rudkin writes, '[In this scene] we are way beyond ghosts and dreams. *Vampyr* is beginning to interchange the physicalities of the living and the undead.'[12] What makes this scene particularly subtle is the manner in which Dreyer keeps his cards close to his chest. We never quite learn in the context of the narrative if the Lord arrived in his actual form, or in the guise of some spirit. The characters never ask and the audience never receives an answer. For some reason though, the scene feels natural in *Vampyr*'s world. As noted, Expressionism was about transferring the character's feeling and emotion to its audience, uninterested in the realistic maneuverings of the world. The feeling for Dreyer was perpetual uncertainty, which is wholly achieved here in a scene where the very existence of a character is cast in doubt.

Uncertainty is a staple of *Vampyr* that runs through its many facets. As David Rudkin duly notes, 'it's difficult to follow, or to like…or indeed, difficult at times to perceive.'[13] Even in Allan Grey's initial entrance, as the character and camera move from left to right, we find ourselves placed in unfamiliar cinematic vocabulary. Rudkin notes, 'to the western rightward-reading eye, such a leftward camera movement feels more laborious, and can of itself induce a

[12] David Rudkin, *Vampyr*, (London: Bfi, 2005), p.41.
[13] Ibid., p.27.

negative feeling in the spectator.'[14] The placement of character and camera are constantly at odds with one another, and with the viewer's basic understanding of film movement. Many times we see 'spatial disjunction at work, dislocating Grey amid what he sees. But in the world he is entering now, darker things emerge to possess this fractured space.'[15] Dreyer isn't interested in conveying uncertainty in the familiar methods of the horror genre, like *Nosferatu*'s methodology of darkening or distorting or tinting the image. He is showing us that uncertainty can permeate in the ordinary aspects of filmmaking, like camera movement and blocking, thus emphasizing a comprehensive idea of uncertainty in every aspect of the film.

Between *Nosferatu* and *Vampyr* we see how vampirism as a concept is being stretched to two extreme ends, both wholly justified considering the intention of the filmmaker and context of the narrative. For Murnau, a pioneer in the genre, it was a space that allowed him to bend the familiar (only slightly) and see what was possible. For Dreyer, it was a means to accentuate the overall essence of uncertainty in all capacities and experiment above all else. And while Expressionism was flexible as a form to allow these two works to exist in their own sphere, we'd see decades later that it was also the conduit which brought these polar opposite styles into a singular unifying film. That film was Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu the Vampyr*e. How Herzog initially approached this work is important to note. According to Lotte Eisner, '[Herzog] linked his work to what he believed to have been the legitimate tradition broken off in 1933 by producing a homage to, and variation of, the work of the Weimar film-maker he most admired, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau.'[16] Herzog's remake is in an essence the coalescence of Murnau's

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[14] David Rudkin, *Vampyr*, (London: Bfi, 2005), p.76.
[15] Ibid., p.43.
[16] S.S. Prawer, *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht*, (London: Bfi, 2004), p.14.

desire to maintain tradition and Dreyer's impulse to subvert form. The manner in which Herzog achieves this is nothing short of outstanding.

With it being a remake of the seminal Murnau film, we see Herzog working from an existing source, much like how Murnau was building from Stoker's already developed world. From here we can already realize Herzog duly recognizing his heritage and wholeheartedly embracing it. It would have been liberating for him to design an entire new vampiric mythos, but by choosing to remake the nation's greatest vampire story, Herzog, a German, finds a sense of pride and responsibility in developing this particular work. And as Murnau found influence in other art forms, particularly opera with Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*, Herzog finds a rather fitting way to pay homage to the great German composer. As Harker embarks on the *Fussreise* (journey on foot), also a long-standing German tradition, he is accompanied by the rousing score of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, 'which helps establish the mood of this key sequence…in which the landscape speaks for the soul.'[17] Herzog also subtly plays homage to John William Polidori's short story, *The Vampyr*e, by choosing to title his film with the very same spelling. And most notably, Herzog takes Murnau's approach in choosing locations. Scholar S.S. Prawer notes, 'Herzog pays tribute to Murnau's film by using elements of the natural world for the creation of mood rather than the painted studio sets that were so conspicuous of the earlier work.'[18]

But for as much as we Herzog steeped in tradition, it is also a groundbreaking vampire picture bent on subverting form, much like Dreyer's *Vampyr*. As Prawer observes, 'Herzog's film represents a deliberate attempt…not just at making a film in a specific genre, but at playing distinctive variations on the Expressionist tradition of German film-making represented and

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[17] Ibid., p.69.
[18] Ibid., p.42.

developed by Murnau.'[19] The most striking example of this is in Klaus Kinski's portrayal of Dracula. Every incarnation of this myth prior had taken the traditional route of portraying Dracula as the characteristic villain, as clearly defined in Murnau's original. Herzog and Kinski decide on a deeper understanding of their Dracula. He has seen all of time and feels not accomplishment, but emptiness. He famously laments to Harker, 'Time is an abyss…profound as a thousand nights. Centuries come and go. To be unable to grow old is terrible. Death is not the worst. Can you imagine enduring centuries, experiencing each day the same futilities.' There is very little villainous rhetoric behind these lines, for he speaks like a tragic character cursed without hope. And so Kinski becomes the melancholy vampire, 'a suffering soul through his many years of undead existence.'[20] Much like Dreyer's *Vampyr*, there is a heavy sense of uncertainty in Herzog's portrait of Dracula. His wants and needs are hardly explicit, and he seems to sulk about the dark corridors of his castle aimlessly, not unlike Allan Grey 50 years ago. This uncertain tone is only furthered by characters who constantly ask 'whether they are suffering from insane delusions and will wake up and find themselves in strait jackets.'[21] When Harker asks the local gypsies about Dracula's castle, their response reflects a world of uncertainty. They warn, 'there is no such castle in the real world; it only exists in the imagination of men who penetrate to a region where 'the light divides' – one part going up, the other down.'[22] Herzog, like Dreyer, is blurring the line between illusion and reality, the living and the dead, but instead of Allan Grey, we see Dracula (a product of the living and the dead) trapped between these two worlds.

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[19] S.S. Prawer, *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht*, (London: Bfi, 2004), p.66.
[20] Ibid., p.42.
[21] Ibid., p.53.
[22] Ibid., p.54.

While many might tether Expressionism to the early ages of cinema, in Herzog's rendition of *Nosferatu*, we see the form return fresh and rejuvenated. With the benefit of hindsight, Herzog was able to study how past masters like Murnau and Dreyer employed Expressionism. He doesn't scorn one form for another, but instead assimilates both into his craft. But that isn't his only intention. He is also interested in bridging the gap by 'paying tribute to [Expressionism] and seeking to attach the New German Cinema to a legitimate tradition broken off by the advent of Nazism.'[23] There was a deep sense of frustration and embarrassment as Germany had been the cradle for some of the finest artists and thinkers of the age until the stain of Nazism discolored all past belief. For Herzog, 'he was part of a fatherless generation…who had in the space of only ten years created a barbarism more terrible than had ever been seen before.'[24] As a nationalistic filmmaker, he thus felt a responsibility to relink German cinema to its extraordinary heritage that flourished before his country descended into its dark Nazi period. The result is a work that is very much a summarization of Expressionism, a film that takes the learning from past masterworks of the era and reshapes them into single, cohesive cinematic effort.

Over five decades separate *Nosferatu* and *Vampyr* from Herzog's *Nosferatu the Vampyre*. In the scheme of cinema it is an ocean of time with great advancements, both technologically and creatively. But even then, all this progress cannot sever the inherent Expressionistic bond that exists between these three films. Unlike other movements tethered to a particular time and place, Expressionism by its very definition is allowed to exist outside those restraints. As Thomas Elsaesser remarks, 'Expressionism was the first movement which allowed the cinema broadly to formulate certain ideas about itself. These ideas can be read…as a decisive rejection of the

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[23] Ibid., p.19.
[24] Ibid., p.13.

assumption that the cinema's task is to reflect phenomenal reality.'[25] Expressionism is about ideas and the expression of ideas. As long as there is a thinker behind the camera, desiring to express the deepest of ideas, there will always be Expressionism, waiting to be used as the most demonstrative of conduits.

[25] Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.27.

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