

Josh Foley

Vampiric Temporality and Ambivalence in *Nosferatu* and *Vampyr*

Abstract

The vampire is frequently considered a border crossing agent, dissolving the line between self and other. Additionally, in F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*, Count Orlok has been read as infecting the bourgeois class with agrarian-aristocratic values. In this essay, I propose an alternative reading in which the modern vampire character poses a contagious challenge to modernity. As a representation of prior conceptions of time, particularly Henri Bergson's conception of time as a duration or *durée*, the vampire's threat to modernity is a temporal one. Filled with innovative apparatuses that seek to standardize and rationalize life, modernity's temporal "other" is a character whose life is not lived according to a regulating clock, but instead by the rhythms of life as felt by the body. I argue for a notion of vampiric-temporality, a conjoining of changing representations and understandings of time in modernity, expressed through the apparatus of cinema, with the invention of the vampire character. Cast on cinema screens, the vampire in *Nosferatu* and *Vampyr* is a contained monster, set up and engineered by modernity itself to both safely repulse and attract viewers and to test and prove that the rationalizing and ordering of life in the present is superior to the past's irrationality.

Both F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) and Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932) make use of a somewhat forgotten icon in vampire myths: the shadow. As one of the primary pieces of *mise-en-scène* in German Expressionist films, it is not surprising that Murnau uses this motif in his film. As Count Orlok is ascending the staircase to suck Nina's blood (and ascending to his doom) in an iconic scene from *Nosferatu*, viewers see only his shadow. The shadow makes its way up the stairs and opens the door to Nina's bedroom; there is no body in sight. When the detached shadow finally enters the room, we first see Nina, terrified, until the shadow's hand appears to clutch Nina's heart. She has been captured, seemingly, by something intangible.

In *Vampyr* (1932), released ten years after *Nosferatu*, the protagonist Allan Gray becomes a spirit himself. Like Count Orlok, Gray's spirit detaches from his body. As a spirit, Gray observes his own death. We see him hover over his own coffin until the perspective of the camera shifts and we see through the eyes of Gray's corpse. After this strange brush with mortality, Gray is able to

end the vampire plague that has struck the town of Courtempierre. To put an end to the undead menace, Gray dies and then comes back to life himself.

In this essay I consider the roles of spirits and shadows in these films, or to the ambivalent worlds, outside the modern purview of the rational and the Enlightenment, that they depict. The worlds that these films concern themselves with are ambivalent precisely because they cannot be rationalized in the terms offered by the European Enlightenment. The vampire operates outside of the standardized time that was instituted in the nineteenth century. In *Nosferatu*, the shadow is a component of the vampire's monstrosity. In *Vampyr*, the metaphysical or the spiritual make Gray the hero, providing him with the means with which to end the vampire's plague. A vampiric temporality is one that both opposes and supports modern conceptions of time. The shadow serves as a key link between vampires and cinema, as it signifies both terror and temporality, two significant characteristics of both vampires and early films. Without the aid of industrial lights, and the lights of the cinematic

apparatus, the vampire would have no shadow; it is a symbol that connects modernity and monstrosity, the rational and the irrational, the contingent and the concrete. The overall project of modernity, which designated some ways of thinking and living as rational and progressive and others as irrational, backward, and evil, was flawed to begin with, never actually achieving or seeking to achieve a uniformly secular, rational, modern world. Ultimately, the shifting roles of shadows, spectrality, and the vampire in these films shows that irrationality and spirituality are necessary to the process and maintenance of modernization, even as they remain its adversaries.

At the turn-of-the-century, representations of newness, or rapid innovation, like bright lights and speeding trains, give shape to past ways of life as not only useless or wasteful, but often as barbaric; a dangerous “Other” to modernity’s enlightened subject. As a supernatural being, the vampire’s vulnerability to sunlight is also a vulnerability to changing conceptions of time in turn-of-the-century Europe and, more broadly, to the very processes of modernization. Time underwent a profound change in the nineteenth century. To accommodate the need of railroad companies and passengers for a single schedule that included regions with different local times, time needed to be standardized. Railroad time was a way to link these localities together, and “the sheer speed of transportation and communication worked to annihilate the uniqueness and isolation of the local.”¹ Time thus had a universalizing effect after its standardization.

Standardized time did not just accompany new inventions, it also fundamentally changed ways of living and working. Mary Ann Doane rigorously traces the effects of these changes to time and their links to cinema in her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*. Doane accounts for two separate notions of time, one experienced internally, or bodily (task-oriented time), and one experienced externally, with the aid of industrial apparatuses (industrialized time): “The clock time used to measure labor, according to [E.P.] Thompson, is opposed to the time-sense associated with the task orientation of an agrarian society or one synchronized with ‘natural’ rhythms, such as a fishing or seafaring community.”² There are several

differences between a task-oriented sense of time and one that is oriented by the clock. Task-oriented time is measured by natural rhythms, like “seasons, weather, tides, the biological rhythms of animals (milking, lambing, and so on).”³ There is less of a distinction between “work” and “life” in agrarian-time societies, and from the perspective of clock-time this approach to work is viewed as wasteful, as time quickly became an exchangeable quantity, like money.⁴ These changes to time are linked to broader social changes, most notably a shift in political and economic capital from the hands of the aristocracy to the bank accounts of a growing bourgeois class. In his article “Nymphs, Shepherds, and Vampires: The Agrarian Myth on Film,” Tom Brass offers a reading of *Nosferatu* alongside agrarian myths, which often look back with nostalgia on the bygone eras of feudalism, landlordism, and the aristocracy.⁵ According to Brass, *Nosferatu* falls into the aristocratic category of these myths, which most typically depict the aristocratic or landlord class in a struggle against the blooming urban bourgeoisie.

The film abounds in examples of this conflict between the two social classes. Count Orlok is an aristocrat who lords over a local region far removed from any cities, an area that would likely be in jeopardy of losing its local character after the arrival of trains, and the disrepair of Count Orlok’s fifteenth century castle evinces a movement of laboring classes from the country to the city. With his power waning as “the countryside is threatened by a rising industrial capitalism in the towns,” the vampire aristocrat must attempt to reproduce a dying cultural logic of lords and vassals by “infecting” the bourgeoisie.⁶ In other words, Count Orlok/*Nosferatu* represents the haunting and stalking past, carrying with it all the markers of agrarian aristocratic society, including its distinct task-oriented temporality, to attempt to challenge, disrupt, and possibly take back power from the burgeoning new social order, which adheres to scientific rationality and industrialism as justification for its dominance over other ways of living and working.

While these myths portray Count Orlok’s landlord class as the enemy of the bourgeoisie, it is important to remember that the vampire is both a monster to modernity and a product of

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it. Nosferatu simultaneously represents a threat to the social order and ideology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and serves to test and prove the believed superiority of rationality and enlightenment by his defeat, in the end, by the mechanisms and characteristics of modernity.

Nosferatu's source material, Bram Stoker's 1897 novel, *Dracula*, points to the ways in which the vampire both threatens and supports the rationale of Enlightenment. Modern time, and its physical sign, the clock or watch, stands out prominently in the epistolary form of Stoker's novel, as each letter or journal entry is marked with exact dates and times. As Alana Fletcher argues in her article "No Clocks in His Castle: The Threat of the *Durée* in Bram Stoker's 'Dracula,'"

The vampire thus represents a recently repressed past, a past before the valuation of quantitative over qualitative had become entrenched, in which the *durée* was the dominant mode of experiencing time. Unlike his modern antagonists, Dracula is not controlled by external notations of time. There appear to be no clocks in his castle ... The Count is governed by his bodily needs, and his time constraints are not that of the modern hour, minute, and second, but of day and night.⁷

Though the characters in the novel attempt to rationalize their experiences through journal documentation, with mention of exact times and train schedules, much of the Vampire's behavior remains outside of their grasp or unknowable in scientific or quantifiable terms. Dracula essentially disrupts the vampire hunters' attempts to map or measure time. The vampire hunters cannot rationalize Dracula because he operates in a different, yet still logical, temporal system. Dracula's way of life is more akin to the agrarian temporalities of the past. Nonetheless, despite his temporal interference, the vampire is defeated in the end. The vampire, as a representation of past conceptions of time, fails to convert the city dwellers to vampires; they remain rational beings caught up in the scheduled and timely exigencies of modern life.

The conflict between Dracula and the hunters is not only based on time, but on the relationship

between time and a modern notion of subjectivity. *Dracula* the novel thus represents the relationship and the struggle between time and identity. The vampire, as Fletcher goes on to argue, is a border-crossing monster that disobeys modern time and challenges the identity division of Self and Other that is formed by empire and colonization. As Fletcher writes, "Constructing the monster becomes a device by which the vices and uncertainties of empire are safely transferred outside the empire itself."⁸ Time becomes a way to demarcate or keep out those who do not or cannot follow its modern rhythms. At the same time, the "Other" is necessary for the empire to believe itself to be superior and to justify its oppression and exploitation of outsiders. In her book *Translating Time*, Bliss Cua Lim shows how conceptions of time in the realm of the fantastic work to disorient standardized time. However, she also points to the ways in which the fantastic, or what may be perceived as irrational, must be both acknowledged and rejected in order for the world to appear as completely rational. In other words, a world that has been disenchanting "must always call up the specter of the savage" in order to maintain its claims to science and reasoning and to produce "enlightened" subjects.⁹

In the same way that empire is dependent on the "Other" to defend its ideology, and to displace its own flaws, scientific rationalism becomes dependent on, or at least paired with, the irrational or the contingent, as represented by the "Other" and by the vampire. This mixture of time and self as both knowable or quantifiable in scientific terms and based in metaphysical terms is easily traceable within the mechanisms and effects of cinema. Indeed, the ambivalence of the vampire reflects the nature of cinema itself. As Mary Ann Doane writes, "Cinema comprises simultaneously the rationalization of time and an homage to contingency. Classical cinematic form involves the strict regulation of a mode that never ceases to strike the spectator as open, fluid, malleable – the site of newness and difference itself."¹⁰ Doane's language of fluidity and malleability points to the relationship between contingency and repeatability that is inherent to film. While cinema is a modern invention that since its inception has been used for scientific experimentation and documentation, Doane argues

that contingency is necessary in cinema, as “the theory of rationalization does not allow for the vicissitudes of the affective, for the subjective play of desire, anxiety, pleasure, trauma, apprehension. Pure rationalization excludes the subject, whose collusion is crucial to the sustenance of a capitalist system.”¹¹ The vampire and cinema are both modern inventions of ambivalence and necessary components in an increasingly industrializing and rationalizing world that, in order to be maintained, needs the support of irrational subjects.

To return to the shadow and the two central texts of this essay, both *Nosferatu* and *Vampyr* play out these characteristics of the modern vampire story. F.W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* portrays an attempt to control and contain the vampire through rationalization and scientific processes. As an ambivalent figure, the vampire reflects the merging of past within present, myth within science, and qualitative time within quantitative. Count Orlok, or Nosferatu, lives outside of the city, in the country, which connotes backwardness. He is drawn to the city by his desire for Nina, the wife of Jonathan Harker. The parallels or mirroring of Harker and Nosferatu appear throughout the film: the two are placed side-by-side when Harker first visits Nosferatu’s castle, and their shared desire for Nina also pairs them together. Nosferatu acts as Harker’s shadow, or his desires manifested in their most unrepressed form.

As mentioned earlier, the shadow is a key characteristic of the German Expressionist filmmakers. Writing on the metaphor of the shadow in early German cinema, James C. Franklin notes,

Both Kracauer and Eisner see the shadow as a visual metaphor for evil or for the dark and threatening forces that allegedly lurked in the pre-Hitler German psyche or soul. In fact, it can be better argued that the shadow’s significance is neither evil nor good but is instead an “other” reality that must be perceived for the sake of existential security or psychic stability.¹²

Certainly, the shadow acts as a device meant to designate the vampire as morally corrupt, especially as darkness in Western film and literature almost always symbolizes evil. However, Franklin’s reading

of the shadow as ambivalent is more accurate of the work being done by the shadow as a visual metaphor. Nosferatu is an “Other” to Jonathan Harker, and to the mob of city residents who would gladly see him dead. Nosferatu, however, can just as easily be read as an animal. In one scene, Dr. Van Helsing compares the vampire to a Venus’s fly-trap to explain the Nosferatu’s behavior. Regarding this scene, Franklin writes, “Murnau carefully establishes the vampire as a natural power by equating it with a hyena, Venus’s fly-trap, a cannibalistic polyp; and as a natural force it seems to belong to a realm lying beyond the normal, rational world of good and evil.”¹³ What is most important about Franklin’s reading of the shadow is that it “must be perceived.” Nosferatu is monstrous from a certain perspective, but from another he is simply a product of nature’s animal hierarchy. Thus, in *Nosferatu*, Dr. Van Helsing provides a scientific template that serves to rationalize the existence of the vampire, and to maintain the supremacy of scientific reasoning over other explanations for the eldritch events in the film. “Existential security or psychic stability” is achieved by placing the vampire within the logic of science, wherein the vampire’s ambivalence, its human and animal natures, can be resolved.

Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *Vampyr* picks up where *Nosferatu* leaves off. The film follows Allan Gray, a man who has an interest in “the study of devil worship and vampires,” as the opening title card of the film tells us. It becomes increasingly clear throughout the film that Gray is a stand-in for film viewers. He remains on the periphery throughout most of the film, observing the unusual events taking place around him and reading from the “Book of Vampires” to make sense of the events that he is seeing. However, Gray’s perception of the shadow world around him does not lead to psychic stability, as Franklin predicts. Instead, the world around Gray, at least as it is represented in microcosm by the town of Courtempierre, begins to unravel and destabilize. Whether viewers are aligned with Gray’s perspective and psychic state or not, the film asks viewers to perceive through an irrational lens, moving away from the epistolary form of Stoker’s *Dracula* and Murnau’s contiguous editing-style in *Nosferatu* into a much more surreal and inexplicable world.

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It is this irrational lens that enables Gray to put an end to the vampire's plague that has been infecting this town. Gray's "Book of Vampires" makes it clear that medical science does not have the capacity to contend with vampirism, contradicting Dr. Van Helsing's assessment. The book describes how the vampire preys on the young, and how the vampire's bite leads its victim to become a vampire and to infect "entire families" and "entire villages" with the curse. All this information on how vampires operate and how to destroy them is given to Gray and the servant, who both stake Marguerite Chopin, the film's vampire antagonist, from an arcane text that invokes the spiritual, or what would be perceived as irrational, instead of the scientific. In other words, *Vampyr* flips the script of *Nosferatu* and *Dracula*. The tools of modernity are not used as defense against the vampire. Instead, one's understanding of "superstitions of centuries past" is the only way to contend with the monstrous "Other" in *Vampyr*.

This shift is significant because it suggests that there is a necessity to irrationality within modernity, and not solely as a way of life reserved for an inferior "Other" whose intellectual progression has been halted. To accept one's contingent existence, *Vampyr* suggests, one must see the world through spiritual means. As such, Allan Gray becomes a spirit in order to observe his life, and more importantly his death, from a distance. Just as Count Orlok/Nosferatu leaves his body and becomes a shadow, Gray must leave his body and become a spirit to reckon with his mortality. In a dream sequence that is also a *memento-mori*, Allan Gray falls asleep on a bench and dreams that he wakes up as a spirit detached from his body. When Gray sees his physical body in a coffin, with an expression on his face that suggests that his soul has not found peace in death, he becomes understandably distraught. The perspective in the film starts to shift at this point. Gray's spirit becomes mysteriously absent, and the camera takes on a first-person point of view. At this moment when the perspective shifts, it is not just Gray's death that the audience is observing, but their own deaths. However, the film frequently reminds viewers that some souls do not rest peacefully after death; some become vampires or spirits trapped in a shadowy in-between world. What is presented here is the urgent desire, on Gray's part and the

spectator's, to die in the correct way, or to die on one's own terms. The dream-like nature of cinema acts as a spiritual means to contemplate one's self and its finitude, and ultimately how death ought to be achieved. In other words, the film itself is inviting viewers to the same realization as Gray – that they must depend on means other than those provided by rational modernization to reach some understanding of the self and its finitude.

In *Vampyr* it is clear that not only is spirituality necessary in modernity, but that the scope of modernization is, and always was, limited. In *Vampyr*, the past-ness that was once used to justify the vilification and claims to the inferiority of the "Other" is now used as a defense against the exact same type of monstrosity. It is important to keep in mind that both films end with the defeat of their vampire antagonists. While the means may have changed, the goal in *Vampyr* is the same as in *Nosferatu*: the death of the vampire "Other." One sees here the flexibility of the dominant social group to recodify the meaning of what was once deemed inferior so that it serves those in power more effectively. Ironically, while *Vampyr* still draws a boundary between the evil past and the good, enlightened present, it lays the groundwork for a critique against overwhelming modernization. Argumentation for rational explanation, in only the ten years between *Nosferatu* and *Vampyr*, shifts to an argument on behalf of the inexplicable, the contingent, and the spiritual.

This ambivalence in how to contend with vampires connects to the general double-standard of the projects of empire and modernity. Where peoples' lives outside of industrialized Western nations are considered backwards, trapped in the past, the past of Europe is romanticized from the early twentieth century onward. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the vampire becomes an increasingly sympathetic character. I would argue that this suggests a growing empathy with outsiders, or at least a willingness to allow for difference, as well as a desire for heterogeneous ways of knowing. More consideration should be given to the vampire's movement from fear and disdain to sympathy and empathy.

Like the shadow that is simultaneously attached to the body and immaterial, the vampire

is an ambivalent figure that both supports and challenges modernity. Vampiric temporality offers a means through which to view time as flexible, serving more purposes than just documentation. Its importance as an object of study lies in its location at this liminal space between objects of derision and objects of necessity; the vampire is both characterized as evil and as the monster whose defeat proves our humanity. What a careful analysis of the vampire in

early film allows for is a renewed understanding of the insularity of the modern project—that it both designs its central problem and the solution. One sees in these films that the division set up by the colonial or modern encounter with the “Other” is a fluid fiction, arousing simultaneously sympathy and fear, and whose logical justification is linked more with power than reason.

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Notes

1 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 7.

2 Ibid., 7.

3 Ibid., 8.

4 Ibid.

5 Tom Brass, “Nymphs, Shepherds, and Vampires: The Agrarian Myth on Film,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 25, no. 3 (2000): 205-237.

6 Ibid., 214.

7 Alana Fletcher, “No Clocks in His Castle: The Threat of the *Durée* in Bram Stoker’s ‘Dracula,’” *Victorian Review* 39, no. 1 (2013), 57.

8 Ibid., 67.

9 Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 22.

10 Doane, 32.

11 Ibid., 11.

12 James C. Franklin, “Metamorphosis of a Metaphor: The Shadow in Early German Cinema,” *The German Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1980): 176-188.

13 Ibid., 180.