POSTMODERNISING THE LADY VAMPIRE: MELANCHOLY, ISOLATION, AND THE FEMALE BLOODSUCKER

Jessica Hughes

Abstract

This article focuses on three films that facilitate a demystification of the vampire by resisting the mythological pretext, and often even the horror or romance conventions, of earlier vampire films. While the films in question – *The Addiction* (Ferrara 1995), *Let The Right One In* (Alfredson 2008) and *Trouble Every Day* (Denis 2001) – are undeniably aware of preconceived notions of the vampire, they are more preoccupied with the psychological implications of vampirism as an illness than making reference to any of their precursors. Their emphasis on the burden of vampirism takes away from the conventional vampire advantages such as sex appeal and special powers.

While most recent work on the vampire film has focused on direct comparisons between contemporary films, this grouping of specific postmodern examples considers which traits recurrently stray from the conventions. Thus, the focus is not on the fact that each of the films in question depict protagonists that drink blood and have a propensity to kill, but on the way they exclude aspects such as the mythical background story and the erotically mysterious vampire in order to present a more realistic figure, burdened by the weight of his or her intense desire for blood.

Key terms:

Vampire, film, female, isolation, melancholy, postmodern

Introduction

There has recently been a representation of cinematic vampires that are devoid of (or, at the very least, lacking) supernatural, overly sentimental, and romanticised characteristics. Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction* (1995), Tomas Alfredson's *Let The Right One In* (2008), and Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day* (2001) are part of this trend, which is the focus of this article. The academics, children, and newly weds of these films are characterisations of vampires that differ from earlier depictions in their representation as the result of diseases or medical experiments rather than mythical associations. These characters are the icons of a postmodern portrayal of the vampire proposed by this paper. I have chosen to group these films together as a means of differentiating them from the many other contemporary vampire films which, while still focusing on the core conventions of vampire narratives, present the vampire as a highly sexualised character, complementary to recurring genres of romance, suspense, horror, and comedy. Equally noteworthy is the shift in the protagonist viewpoint: while films following the original Dracula narrative tend to align the spectator's gaze with the male vampire, objectifying the beautiful female victim or Dracula's erotic female "children," a handful of recent postmodern vampire films instead offer the perspective of the female

protagonist. Before analysing these characters more closely, it is necessary to outline the key concepts framing the study of these postmodern female vampires, including a brief look at how they are defined in relation to their precursors and the evolution of the vampire film.

Defining the postmodern vampire

The purpose of this article is to show that a female, postmodern vampire has emerged out of the current vampire craze. The films I have grouped together are more critical and self-reflexive, offering representations of the vampire that are simultaneously aware of and uninterested in previous incarnations of the vampire figure. Although they represent a shift away from conventional vampire portrayals, they do rely heavily on the influence of previously established conventions of the vampire, stemming from century-old British literature such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872). The century following these films saw countless reinventions of the vampire myth onscreen, occurring across several genres and in various countries. Films featuring vampires show them as both protagonists and antagonists, in horrifying, romantic, and even comedic lights. Recently, however, cinematic vampire representations have split into two different streams, one remaining relatively true to the traditional narrative, and the other offering an interpretation of the vampire as a less mystical figure. The films in this latter strand have certain common characteristics, despite distinctly different stylistic and narrative traits, which I find to be defining features of the postmodern vampire film. Still drawing inspiration from myths about those who survive on human blood, the postmodern vampire film tends to show a less sexualised depiction of the vampiric attack, especially in cases where the vampire does not prey on its victims with the intention to "turn'' them. Both frustration and shame are attached to the resulting acts of these characters after they have been infected, unlike the vampire figures of other contemporary films that remain true to the traditional narrative.

One of the most important features separating postmodern representations of the vampire from other characterisations is the ambiguity in the films' messages. In its shift from the classic allegories of plague, sexuality, and addiction, the postmodern vampire film distinguishes itself from the traditional vampire narrative and other representations of current societal fears. Fredric Jameson's (1992) influential essay, "Reification and utopia in mass culture," reinforces the futility of trying to apply a single metaphor or theory to a body of work. Using Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) as an example, Jameson argues that the desire to impose some sort of symbolism on the shark distracts us from its real purpose, which is to lay the foundation for facing several different social and class conflicts connecting the primary characters of the film. Without declaring any interpretation of the shark erroneous, Jameson instead proposes that its presence forces us to focus too much on its metaphors and ultimately overlook the greater purpose of the film. He notes, 'as a symbolic vehicle, then, the shark must be understood in terms of its essentially polysemous function rather than any particular content attributable to it by this or that spectator' (Jameson 1992:35). Jameson's postmodern perspective insists that there is not one single message being presented, but a multitude, open for interpretation. The postmodern film, then, similarly denies the possibility of one overarching moral but, rather, offers a narrative saturated with ambiguity and inconclusiveness.

As is the case with Jameson's reading of *Jaws*' cinematic shark, the cinematic vampire should not be read

exclusively as a metaphor for HIV/AIDS, addiction, sexuality, or any other individual concern. Instead of focusing on a specific representation, the postmodern vampire serves as a pretext for the consideration of various issues, with more specific physical and psychological hesitations tending to come at the forefront, rather than the greater societal concerns of earlier depictions. The multiplicity of this revised narrative suggests that the vampire's purpose is not to symbolise a simple message, but to act as the connection between many. As Andrew Schopp (1997:232) points out: 'the vampire has become more than simply an archetype of some static cultural desire and fear; it now constitutes a mirror that reflects shifting cultural desires and fears'. *The Addiction*, for example, offers a renewed interpretation of the vampire narrative because Kathleen, as the vampire figure, brings together issues of collectivity, addiction, and existential crisis through its extensive philosophical musings. Instead of adapting the traits of the established vampire characters from the typical genres (horror, romance), postmodern vampires often exhibit similar qualities to characters from less conventional (sub)genres, such as *The Addiction* as a philosophical art film. Other alternative subgenres incorporating the vampire narrative include kung fu (*Mr. Vampire* [Lau 1985]), blaxploitation (*Ganja and Hess* [Gunn 1973], *Blacula* [Crain 1972]), erotic (lesbian) films (*Vampyros Lesbos* [Franco 1971], *Daughters of Darkness* [Kumel 1971]), and science-fiction/anime (*Vampire Hunter D* [Ashida 1985]).

One of the most significant changes during this evolution is the shift from portrayals of the vampire as a villain to the vampire as a sympathetic creature. Though readings of early vampire narratives interpret the monstrous images of the undead consuming the living to represent societal fear of the Black Death,[1] the vampire now stands for countless concerns including addiction, social alienation, and sexuality. On the contrary, films like *The Addiction* (Ferrara 1995), *Let the Right One In* (Alfredson 2009) and *Trouble Every Day* (Denis 2001), though still aware of these conventions, use the supernatural less as a spectacle and focus more closely on their female bloodsuckers as sympathetic, yet not overly sentimental, characters. In doing so, these films reveal de-romanticised, de-mystified vampires who demonstrate signs of vampirism as an illness, the result of an unfortunate, and often unexplained, circumstance. This female postmodern vampire is neither exotic nor envied, proud nor pitied, bringing to the forefront issues of alienation, which ultimately provoke sympathy for the vampire through their onscreen depictions of melancholy and isolation. A brief consideration of the postmodern pre-cursor – the romantic, mysterious/mythical vampire – sets up the subsequent analysis of how these sympathetic vampires offer a new perspective on the vampire narrative. This is predominantly seen through the reinterpretation of the female vampire protagonist as either a non-sexual being (Kathleen in *The Addiction*, Eli in *Let The Right One In*) or a means of reversing the depiction of onscreen sex, so that the female perspective offers a unique focus on the naked male body (Coré in *Trouble Every Day*).

From exotic to sympathetic

According to Frank Lafond (2008:154) in *The cinema of Tod Browning*, in contrast to FW Murnau's early vampire film, *Nosferatu* (1922), which 'insists upon the vampire's physical abjection,' Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) aims to present the vampire figure as 'an irresistible seducer'. This shift, in just over a decade between the two films, marked a new portrayal of the bloodsucking creature that would be carried on for the century to come. Since the release of Browning's film in 1931, the vampire figure has evolved into something significantly more sexual than Murnau's *Count Orlok*

(Max Schreck). In addition to Bela Lugosi's Eastern European accent, unfamiliar to American audiences, his character is presented in Browning's film as an attractive aristocrat who manages to appeal to both men and women. The exoticised vampire is even more prominent in films that follow, as both male and female vampires fill the role of the sexual seducer. Tim Kane (2006: 43-44) notes: 'The erotic [vampire] film cycle began May 8, 1957, with the American release of *Horror of Dracula*,' followed by films such as *Sex and the Vampire* (1970), *Lust for a Vampire* (1970), and *Lesbian Vampires* (1970), all of which portrayed victims welcoming, rather than fearing, the vampire's bite. In the 1980s, gender and sexuality began to be presented in a new light within the vampire film. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Kuzui, 1992) focuses on a dominating female teenager (Kristy Swanson) who is resistant to any appeal the vampire may have, eventually taking pride in her task as the designated slayer. Despite their variations on the initial portrayal of Dracula as an unsightly figure, both *Buffy* and Tod Browning's *Dracula* remain consistent in their familiar depiction of the main characters studying the traditions of the vampire in order to learn how to deal with them (Waller 1986:8).

This aspect only exists, however, when the film focuses solely on the vampire hunters. Films such as *The Lost Boys* (Schumacher 1987), and *Blade* (Norrington 1998) instead portray vampires who maintain a certain sense of pride in their diversity. For example, in *Metamorphoses of the vampire in literature and film*, Erik Butler (2012:182) suggests the hazing of new members entering *The Lost Boys'* teenage gang of vampires is much like that of a college fraternity, emphasising the bonding rather than isolating experience of vampirism. Other films, straying from the classic *Dracula* narrative, are forced to convey the vampire conventions in diverse ways, as the focus shifts exclusively to the perspective of the vampires themselves in films such as *Interview with the Vampire* (Jordan 1994).

This shift initiated a new portrayal of vampires as sympathetic creatures; *Interview With the Vampire* was one of the first vampire films[2] to offer viewers a perspective of events within the narrative that invites sympathy through understanding, ultimately eliminating the representation of the vampire as the exoticised grotesque. Furthermore, although it follows many of the same vampire conventions as Stoker's novel, Jordan's film puts a greater emphasis on familial relations,[3] portraying both the hardships and the intense bonding of its vampire protagonists. Although Lestat (Tom Cruise) and Louis (Brad Pitt) are portrayed as seductive to several women within the film, a significant perspective of the two older vampires comes from Claudia (Kirsten Dunst), an ageless child vampire who views these men as family rather than sexually alluring. More recently, however, the *Twilight* franchise[4] has once again returned the perspective to the human being, but still offers a sympathetic portrayal of the family bond in a group of 'good' vampires. Both films ultimately emphasise the persistence of the nuclear family. Furthermore, rather than trying to eliminate vampires for the greater good of society, as Buffy (Sarah Michelle Geller) does, *Twilight's* protagonist, Bella (Kristen Stewart), takes more interest in personal endeavours, openly expressing her romantic interest in the 'vegetarian' vampire Edward Cullen (Robert Pattinson) early in the film. *Twilight* focuses on the romantic exchanges between Bella and Edward and the supernatural powers of both good and bad vampires, marking a significant shift from the early days of *Nosferatu* and *Dracula* when the vampire only represented evil, as associated with its depictions of lust, libido, and sexual energy.

Despite their remarkable differences, each of these films can be further contrasted with a small group of vampire films released over the past two decades in which vampire clichés (particularly this focus on good

versus evil) are replaced by depictions of melancholy and isolation to concentrate on sympathetic female vampires, exhibiting little or no supernatural power. In *The Addiction*, *Let the Right One In*, and *Trouble Every Day*, sympathy for the vampire can be partially attributed to the fact that all three films depict female protagonists in their struggle with social alienation. While female vampires have been portrayed since the early days of vampire literature in stories such as *Carmilla*, it is rare to find a female vampire protagonist not depicted (and exoticised) as a lesbian, predominantly as part of the 'erotic' cycle outlined above. Nonetheless, the sympathetic vampire dates back to nineteenth century literature; as Andrea Weiss (1992:87) points out in *Vampires and violets*, Carmilla 'is characterised sympathetically in that she acts out of compulsion rather than malice'. She observes, however, that what is used from the original story in filmic adaptations such as *The Vampire Lovers* (Baker, 1970) is not the sympathetic portrayal, but merely the lesbianism, 'reworked into a male pornographic fantasy' (Weiss 1992:87).

In this sense, while the three films in question may draw their sympathetic females from Le Fanu's text, in each case she has been considerably reconstructed as a normalised, heterosexual vampire. While the postmodern female vampire is much like her predecessor in her 'threat of violence as well as of sexuality' (Weiss 1992:93), she is no longer depicted as the one taking pleasure in her violent/sexual acts, instead demonstrating melancholia as a result of the isolating nature of her disease and position within society. *The Addiction* is perhaps the most explicit of the three in questioning the position of its female protagonist, as she contemplates the nature of her existence throughout the film.

The Addiction and the philosophical vampire

Opening with a slideshow of stills from Vietnam and the My Lai Massacre in 1968, *The Addiction* reflects on a number of historical events through the eyes of philosophy PhD candidate Kathleen, who is taking a course on morality at New York University (NYU). The film takes place on and around the NYU campus and Kathleen's story of addiction is frequently intercut with images of the bustling streets of New York City, as well as still photographs of tragic events like My Lai and the Holocaust. Although the term vampire is never actually used within the film, what follows is a series of events that would be easily recognised by most viewers as the transformation into vampirism: Kathleen is pulled into an alleyway by a mysterious woman in black, bitten on the neck and left with an aggressive-looking wound that an unconcerned police officer dismisses as the result of an everyday street attack. When Kathleen returns to the hospital after vomiting blood at school, the doctor insists she is merely suffering from some kind of 'chronic anemia.'

The film continues as Kathleen makes various attempts to satisfy her thirst for blood, her victims ranging from random strangers on the street to her professor (Paul Caulderon) and her friend, Jean (Edie Falco). Kathleen's addiction initially distracts her from her academic pursuit, but she eventually finds herself enlightened after meeting Peina (Christopher Walken), who forces her to resist the temptations of feeding, allowing her to sink deep into withdrawal. Inspired, like many writers before her,[5] by the different stages of addiction, Kathleen completes her dissertation and holds a party to celebrate her successful defense. While all of her victims seem to have disappeared following her attacks throughout the film, they, strangers and friends alike, suddenly return at this celebration as Kathleen's

Figure 1: Promotional poster and scene from *The Addiction*, directed by Abel Ferrara, 1995, images courtesy of October Films

"children" to participate in a violent orgy-like bloodbath of an attack where all the vampires drain those guests who are deemed less "enlightened."

While the film's portrayal of the vampire's transformation and resulting desire for blood is reflective of its numerous predecessors, several aspects of *The Addiction* challenge the conventions of the vampire film, including the philosophical outlook on the characters' symptoms and behaviour. However, perhaps the most significant variation on these conventions is its layered approach to the allegories being presented; straying from the tradition of depicting the vampire as a metaphor for a single societal fear (the plague, HIV/AIDS, etc.), *The Addiction* deals with several issues simultaneously. Referring to the film as a 'historical synthesis,' Nicole Brenez (2007:8-9, emphasis in original) suggests that the principle of vampirism can be seen to represent '*capitalism as catastrophe*,' a collective of different possibilities that may be interpreted uniquely to each viewer. Not only do the images of Vietnam and the Holocaust haunt us into aligning the source of these catastrophes with the horrors of poverty as a result of American imperialism, there is also an overt connection between vampirism and drug addiction, as well as HIV/AIDS and other contagious diseases, all of which are absorbed by Kathleen in her attempt to prove that 'the only story is the story of evil' (Brenez 2007:23).

In this search to understand the evil inherent in her society, Kathleen kills her victims without sympathy or regret, insisting they have brought this suffering upon themselves by being a member of a corrupt society, unable to mark themselves as individuals by saying no with confidence and walking away. Kathleen's opposition to the sheep-like behaviour of the masses is set up prior to Casanova's attack, during her frustrated discussion with Jean at the beginning of the film, when they debate whether or not it was fair to implicate one man in the raping and murdering of hundreds of Vietnamese women and children, simply because he was the only one in the group whom they could prove guilty. Kathleen is set up as a sympathetic character precisely for this reason: rather than emphasising her thirst for blood, *The Addiction* instead focuses on Kathleen's search for knowledge.

In place of the standard initial fright following the vampiric attack, Kathleen is more preoccupied with getting an answer. Denied this privilege by the officer who claims it was a random street attack, Kathleen returns home frustrated and dazed, no longer able to focus on her academic pursuits. A scene shortly after Kathleen's attack shows her absent from class at NYU, appearing only at the end, with sunglasses on, to speak to her professor. Despite his friendly tone and inviting atmosphere, Kathleen responds with one-word answers, suggesting the difficulty she is having with adjusting to her illness. However, despite the sympathy we feel for Kathleen's struggle, particularly when she is forced into withdrawal, the outcome of the film is to show how the illness ultimately provides her with a new sense of control over her own knowledge, finding the answers she has been searching for in the effects of her addiction. Prior to becoming a vampire, Kathleen is presented as an active PhD student, openly expressing her opinions and questioning what she is taught. However, it is not until she experiences the isolation resulting from her addiction that she finds herself enlightened.

The Addiction's avoidance of the term vampire makes the references to societal concerns (such as drug addiction) more overt because it does not conceal these anxieties under the guise of a mythical figure. Besides Peina's claims of 'eternity' and being 'nothing,' the film's ambiguous title is used more loosely to open up the interpretation of what exactly the protagonist is addicted to. The withdrawal sequence in the final third of the film emphasises the relationship between isolation and having sympathy for the vampire. This sequence is most obvious in its connection between Kathleen's addiction to blood and the film's reference to drug addiction. Peina, claiming he is 'almost human' because of his ability to defecate, amongst other 'normal' things that Kathleen is unable to do, such as drinking tea or sleeping at night, forces Kathleen into withdrawal to help alleviate her cravings. Her initial reaction is to try to kill herself, cutting her wrists with a file, but Peina calmly explains that this will not have any effect on her: 'You can't kill what's dead. Eternity's a long time. Get used to it.' Escaping from Peina's apartment while he is out, Kathleen stumbles along the streets, begging for help, looking for a 'fix,' as Peina so aptly describes it. The result of Kathleen's isolation is not overcoming her addiction, but obtaining a new understanding of what it means to be addicted. Finding enlightenment in her new control over her addiction, she observes, 'existence is the search for relief from our habit, and our habit is the only relief we can find.' Rather than focusing on the physical effects of the film's vampiric attacks, the outcome of the protagonist's transformation is to encourage a more qualified understanding of the nature of issues like addiction.[6]

The film's portrayal of addiction also calls attention to the emotion-numbing effects of over-dependency on both legal and illegal substances, which foregrounds the isolation of the film and works against the romantic aspect predominant in many of the classical vampire narratives. Although Kathleen's professor appears to be interested in her romantically, her preoccupation with dissecting both the words and actions of the people she interacts with leaves her seeming cold-hearted and sexually uninterested. Although her initial reaction to her attack is fear, followed by anger, as she begins to adjust to her new lifestyle, she seems to lose her sense of emotion altogether, speaking in a deep, monotone voice to strangers and friends alike. Even when she tries to use sex appeal to attract victims to prey on, she is not romantic – instead, she bluntly invites them to her house, or even into a nearby alleyway and immediately attacks them without so much as a kiss. The only scene that offers a longer introduction to an attack is when her professor walks her to her flat and she

convinces him to come inside. There is a brief glimpse of romantic potential (implied earlier by the special interest the professor has shown in her), but Kathleen quickly exits to the kitchen and returns with materials to prepare some heroin. This emphasises the film's ultimate metaphor: 'Dependency is a marvelous thing. It does more for the soul than any formulation of doctoral material. Indulge me.' Here, Kathleen's addiction to blood is blurred with the film's reference to drug addiction in her preparation to inject the heroin into her professor's arm, followed by a cut to him lying lifeless on her bed, two lines on his arm, marked 'IN' and 'OUT.' This shot aligns the two addictions by implying the injection of heroin simultaneously with the extraction of blood. *The Addiction*'s minimal plot and character development is highlighted here with the disappearance of the professor following Kathleen's attack, only to be seen again without explanation at Kathleen's thesis defense, after nearly thirty minutes of the film have passed. Allowing the audience to connect each scene on their own, transitions become less important than the depiction of Kathleen's different stages of addiction.

Let The Right One In and the sexless child vampire

A similar pace is set in *Let The Right One In*, which also employs long shots and extended takes without filling in all the detail: the camera lingers on depictions of winter in Stockholm and the bonding of young Oskar (Kare Hedebrant) and his vampire neighbour Eli (Lina Leandersson), often with little or no dialogue. The film begins with an establishing shot of a snowy night, and then introduces Oskar in his room, fighting off imaginary bullies. People are seen moving in next door and, after the introduction of other secondary characters such as Oskar's teacher and classmates, he meets Eli on the climber outside their building. Despite her odd appearance and lack of clothing in the bitter cold, Oskar asks few questions and they become intrigued with each other through a mutual interest in the Rubik's Cube.

Figure 2: Promotional poster and scenes from *Let The Right One In*, directed by Tomas Alfredson, 2008, images courtesy of Sandrew Metronome

Oskar is set up as an outcast at school, bullied aggressively by a group of boys, though the depiction of his growing relationship with Eli throughout the film is aligned with his eventual attempt to defend himself. The support he finds in Eli is depicted as entirely separate from her portrayal as a vampire – he does not recognise her as one until much later in the film. Meanwhile, the town they live in experiences a series of murders, as Hakan (Per Ragnar), Eli's parental figure,[7] hunts down victims to drain their blood for her. As Eli and Oskar grow closer, they begin to bond over their mutual reliance on violence (Eli for food, Oskar for self-defense). Still, the bullying continues and eventually Eli comes to rescue him.

This final mass killing sequence is set up in direct opposition to the traditional vampire film, which mainly focuses on bloodsucking-induced violence and supernatural powers. Instead, Eli's attack is presented relatively discreetly as a defense killing, rather than a feeding: the camera remains focused on Oskar being held underwater instead of showing the attack directly. This functions as a significant departure from the action sequences of other contemporary vampire films, which highlight the special effects and violence of the vampiric attack. While the sound establishes the perspective of Oskar – the empty hollowness heard underwater – the image depicts only the audience's perspective, watching the young boy close to drowning, eyes closed and breath held, unaware of anything besides his impending death. The first sign of something happening above ground comes with a fully clothed leg swinging through the water in front of Oskar, but still he unknowingly focuses on holding his breath. The feet appear to be dragging through the pool, suddenly disappear, and then a decapitated head sinks to the bottom. Suddenly the hand holding Oskar down goes limp and begins to sink, only to reveal the bloody stump where it has been severed from the body. Finally, a much smaller hand grabs hold of Oskar and pulls him out of the water. Shifting to his perspective, we see an out-of-focus shot of Eli's blood-spattered face, which clears as Oskar's eyes open further and he realises she has saved him. A long shot of the boys lying in pieces on the pool deck confirms both Oskar's and the audience's suspicions that Eli has finally relieved Oskar of the bullies.

Although this powerful attack (along with other scenes where she moves through space in a non-human way) suggests that Eli has the capability to move faster and with more force than most human beings of her size and apparent age, her powers are 'more a matter of stretching the laws of physics than of breaking them,' as Kevin Jackson (2009:42) argues. The film does not dwell on these powers, implying they are a mere side effect of her illness. In this respect, *Let The Right One In* is less about where Eli comes from or how she became a vampire than her growing bond with Oskar. When she tells him she is not a girl, he hardly reacts ('Oh ... But do you want to go steady or not?'), and their conversation about her desire for blood is almost as nonchalant. When he asks Eli if she is a vampire, she responds: 'I live off blood, yes,' but never actually gives herself this label. Similarly, when he asks if she is dead, she replies: 'No. Can you tell?' She explains that she is twelve, but has been twelve for a long time, and then, as if this new information has failed to change anything, Oskar continues to explore Eli's apartment, observing her treasures. The film demystifies the vampire by refusing to set her up with a mythical background; Eli lacks the traditional goal of converting humans or spreading her disease. Instead, her struggle to survive is just as much a cause for sympathy as the young love that buds between Eli and Oskar, despite their obvious differences. In many ways, the audience's sympathy

is provoked by the film's preference for showing reaction over action.

This stylistic inclination is defined by the film's long takes, which are accompanied by little dialogue, separating it from the classical Hollywood style. In the first scene portraying Oskar in the courtyard outside his apartment, nearly two minutes pass – he pulls out his knife, begins attacking a tree, encounters Eli for the first time, and is informed they cannot be friends – before the camera cuts to a reaction shot of Oskar watching Eli walk away, already intrigued by his new neighbour. In many scenes like this, long shots are also external shots, depicting the cold and snowy Swedish winter. When Hakan goes into the forest to find a victim for Eli to feed from, a stationary camera sits at a distance, watching him through the trees, waiting for someone to pass. The take lasts for nearly a minute before cutting to a moving camera, following Hakan and a now limp body through the woods, and then sitting still again, watching him drain the blood.[8] These stylistic differences from the traditional vampire film shift the emphasis on the often-ruthless power of the vampire to feelings of melancholy and isolation associated with vampiric tendencies.

The portrayals of melancholy in *Let The Right One In* are connected to the relentless Swedish winters, as depicted in the scene briefly described above. The effect of these harsh conditions ultimately makes the humans' behaviour in the film seem much worse than the vampire's. While Eli's melancholia is related to starvation and her inability to live as a normal child, the citizens of this suburban Stockholm community have a less defined reason for their cruelty. Scenes of Oskar and Eli bonding are contrasted with scenes of Oskar being bullied at school to highlight the more sympathetic nature of the vampire. Similarly, the pompousness of the group of adults meeting at the local bar makes the subsequent death of their friend less grievous to the audience. While her first victim, Jocke, appears naïve when he is attacked walking home from the bar, we are urged to feel more sympathy for the vampire, as she begins to sob after feeding on him, than his mourning friends, who seem to portray the same harshness as the wintery setting. Sympathy is also invoked by the use of camera angles in the film, which often reflect the changing relationships between characters.

Oskar and Eli's increasing intimacy is depicted by the camera's gradual movement toward the pair, peaking in a scene consisting almost entirely of close ups on their faces in Oskar's bed upon agreeing to 'go steady.' Closing with a close up on their hands clasped together, the scene cuts to a medium long exterior shot of the apartment complex covered in snow, then moves back into Oskar's bedroom with a close up on a note Eli has left for him. This shift marks their growing distance from the melancholy of the Swedish winter and the brutality of the bullying that occurs in its midst as they begin to rely solely on each other. The following scene, a school field trip to an outdoor ice rink is dominated by long shots as the children play, and it is only when Oskar begins to defend himself that the shots become closer, marking his new motivation to stand up to the bullies, drawn from his budding relationship with Eli. The changing camera angles mark the characters' shifts from the isolated melancholia of their lives before meeting, to the new life they begin upon boarding the train and leaving Stockholm. While this ending does not promise a happier future for the two characters, as it is implied that Oskar will assume the role of the deceased Hakan, it does suggest a departure from the true villains – the humans – of the film.

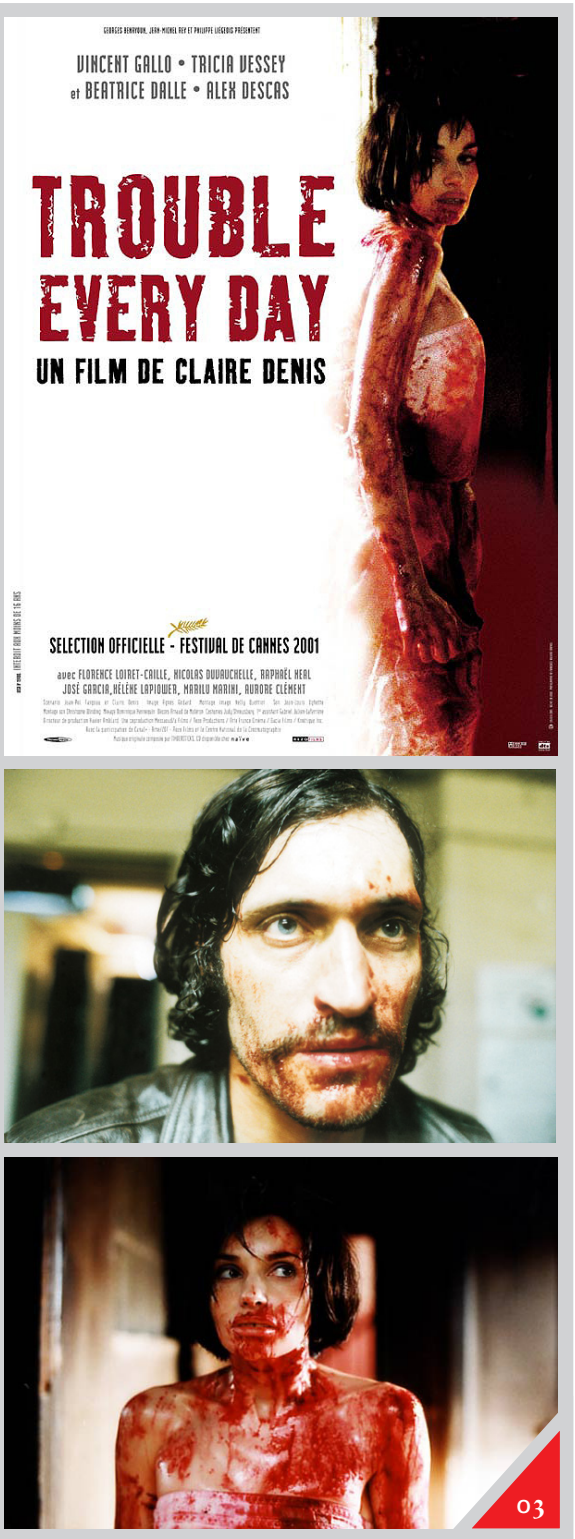

Figure 3: Promotional poster and scenes from *Trouble Every Day*, directed by Claire Denis, 2001, images courtesy of the distributors

Trouble Every Day and the inexplicit vampire

Extended takes are also used in *Trouble Every Day* to highlight the film's theme of isolation, particularly because they are accompanied by minimal dialogue. The opening scene of the film introduces Coré (Beatrice Dalle) as she attracts the attention of a passing truck. Although no details are shown or told (instead, a moving handheld camera shows a fifteen-second take of the skyline as the sun sets), a cut to a man riding up on a motorcycle and discovering Coré in a field, seemingly unharmed yet covered in blood, hints that she has preyed on the truck driver. Shortly after, Coré and the man (Leo [Alex Descas]) are shown at home together, implying some kind of romantic attachment. Leo is developed as a sympathetic figure, devoted to caring for Coré, though neither their relationship nor the reason for Coré's behaviour is explained in detail. Two other primary characters are introduced soon after: an American couple on a plane to Paris for their honeymoon. Shane (Vincent Gallo) and June (Tricia Vessey) both initially fulfill the typical expectations of newly weds – both excited and nervous – but the former also appears to have some anxiety, defining him as an uneasy character early in the film, though at first there are only vague suggestions that he is suffering from some kind of unknown illness. Upon arrival in Paris, Shane begins searching for someone, though even his new bride seems unaware of his intentions. The lives of the two couples collide at this point, when it becomes (somewhat) clear that Shane is in fact looking for Leo. A series of brief flashbacks suggest the two men worked together years before on some kind of medical experiment. It is implied that Coré was also involved – though there are still no details as to what exactly happened, Shane appears

anxious to find her after being told she is ill. When he arrives at her flat, their assertive embrace suggests a romantic history (also hinted at earlier by Shane's unconvincing denial of a past affair), but, soon after, Coré sets fire to her flat and Shane strangles her, leaving her to be consumed by the flames. Following this inexplicable encounter, Shane returns to the hotel and feeds on their housekeeper. The film ends back in the hotel room, where June returns to find Shane in the shower and waits hesitantly for him to come out. When Shane retreats, he tells his wife he is feeling good, but wants to go home, and their subsequent embrace suggests the potential for a happy ending. However, in the final moments, the camera switches to the perspective of June as we see a drop of blood roll down the shower door and her reaction shot, wide-eyed, still embracing her husband, leaves much uncertainty at the film's close.

This vagueness is heightened by the number of questions left unanswered at the end of the film (I am hesitant to call it the 'resolution,' as very little is actually resolved here). In the end, the characters in the film end up being more of a mystery than the illness itself. Once it is implied that the disease is the result of a medical experiment, the audience is still left wondering about the goals of both the individual characters and the initial experiment. Shane's behaviour, perhaps the strangest of all of them, is unexplained for most of the film and the end continues in its elusiveness as he never actually finds Leo – only the implication that there is no cure for his illness. It is equally unclear why Coré was involved in the experiment and whether she has any goals beyond killing and consuming as a result – her single line in the film reveals that she simply wants to die. Leo seems to want to protect Coré, but at the same time appears disgusted by her, and June appears to be simultaneously in love with Shane and ready to give up on him. Perhaps the most ambiguous character is the housekeeper who is mainly portrayed as separate from the other characters, yet, in many scenes, is given her own perspective. In the end, her only defined purpose is as a victim for Shane. The lack of clarity regarding these characters' goals ultimately prevents the viewer from relating to any of them as the protagonist, a direct opposition to the traditional vampire narrative, which focuses closely on goal driven characters, typically including the vampire figure. Yet, even though these characters are emotionally detached from our perspective, sympathy is still invoked through the vague implications that they are humans who are "suffering" and cannot exert control over what afflicts them, rather than the supernatural creatures that typically exhibit the same aggressive tendencies.

Ambiguity separates *Trouble Every Day* from *The Addiction* and *Let The Right One In* as well as the traditional vampire film because it never actually establishes itself as one. In his article "Textures of terror: Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day*," Douglas Morrey (2004) points out that even though the term vampire is never used in the film, there are still plenty of discreet references to the conventions of the vampire film: the ring of blood around Coré's mouth; the camera lingering around the chambermaid's neck from Shane's point of view; what looks like the mark of a bite on June's upper arm; Shane's sensitivity to the bright light in the lab; Coré opening her coat like bat wings as she absorbs the night air; and, finally, Coré being consumed by flames near the end of the film. These reflections of conventional notions of vampirism are presented as the side effects of an illness and focus more on the medical aspect than trying to set up the predetermined con-

ventions that traditional vampire films tend to follow. Furthermore, Morrey (2004) suggests that *Trouble* is able to resist the all-consuming theoretical discourse of the horror/vampire film by not 'allowing itself to be claimed by the genre with its full iconographic and ideological implications. The film, as it were, references a tradition of vampire cinema, but without ever quite "coming out" as a vampire movie.'

The characters in *Trouble Every Day* are also removed from the traditional characters of the vampire narrative because of their lack of romantic qualities. Any scenes that might be considered romantic are highly contradictory: passionate sex scenes that are far more frightening than erotic are contrasted with couples who appear to be in love, yet physically lack the passion they attempt to express. Neither of these two cases is typical of the romanticised vampire film, which portrays love stemming from the exoticness of the vampire. Instead, these couples exhibit the surface qualities of people in love – kissing and sweet talk between newlyweds Shane and June on the plane, and Leo's protection of Coré despite her aggressive behaviour – yet seem ultimately unable to follow through with the expectations of 'real' romance – honesty, passion, trust. The film's two most gruesome scenes, however, are also important indicators of the theme of isolation running throughout *Trouble Every Day*. Both Coré and Shane's extra-marital sexual encounters and subsequent killings highlight the reasons for their inability to experience romance in their relationships. Both Coré's encounter with the neighbourhood boy and Shane's with the hotel housekeeper mark the film's notably few gory scenes considering its resemblance to the horror genre in many other ways.[9]

Coré's encounter with the neighborhood boy starts out erotic as they begin to kiss through the wooden barrier that keeps her inside, and the boy struggles to break through into her room. Once he succeeds, the camera cuts to a close up on a bare stomach, not immediately distinguishable because it is so close up and detached from the rest of the body. As Lisa Downing (2007:56) notes, 'in the controversial erotic-horror pastiche *Trouble Every Day* (2001), the human body is subjected to a radical making-unfamiliar'. The camera slowly moves along the naked body until male chest hair and nipples become recognisable, and then cuts to the boy's face, revealing a relaxed pleasure as he lies in Coré's bed. Remaining close, the camera follows her hands slowly moving along his body and then pulls back to reveal their lower halves connecting, before briefly cutting to the boy's friend waiting downstairs for him. Coré's touch becomes more aggressive as she moves up to kiss him and the camera seems to focus more specifically on his extended neck, which she begins to nip at. While this appears playful at first, the scene quickly shifts from erotic to gruesome as extra-diegetic music cues to speed up the pace, and she pins down his arms, preparing to attack. The first sign of his displeasure comes in his moans, which have turned from those of pleasure to pain, followed by his cringing face as Coré grabs his head and takes complete control. Finally, his soft moans become intense screams of terror and agony, begging her to stop, as blood begins to run down his face.

After cutting back, a final time, to his friend downstairs, ultimately deciding not to investigate the cries, the camera returns to Coré, continuing to devour the boy's face and, later, poking at the holes she has created in his body. Morrey (2004) reads this as a rare depiction of 'a male body, reconfigured as open and accessible'. This scene is paralleled soon after by a similar attack made by Shane back at his hotel, though

Coré's encounter, and subsequent bloody artwork on the canvas of their white wall is much more extensive.

After he has found Coré and discovers he is not alone in his intense craving for blood, Shane appears to be inspired to satisfy his own thirst and follows the housekeeper down to the basement of the hotel, where she is changing, to seduce her. Like the earlier scene with Coré and the neighbour, the encounter begins consensual, with the victim appearing to expect little more than a random sexual rendezvous. This time, however, the scene is filmed further back, revealing the couple groping each other from a medium shot and following them down to the floor at the same distance. The switch from erotic to terrifying happens much more quickly here, with Coré's gentle touching being replaced by Shane's frantic removal of the girl's underwear and aggressive movements on top of her, pinning her down. It is obvious much sooner that the victim is uncomfortable as she struggles and shouts, trying to free herself from his attack. The differences between these two scenes suggest that Coré's much earlier awareness of her illness makes her a more sympathetic vampire, while Shane, just coming to terms with his urges, comes across as more of a culprit. Whereas Coré preys on the boy's face and chest, Shane indulges immediately in the housekeeper's female parts, emphasising many more sexual implications to his perversion.

While sexuality remains fairly explicit throughout *Trouble Every Day*, the lack of romance in the scenes I have analysed emphasises the dominating sense of isolation and melancholy resulting from the vampire-like illness the characters suffer from. Despite the challenge to relate to their hidden or non-existent goals, Denis presents Shane and, even more so, Coré, because of her progressed state, as sympathetic vampires by focusing on their struggles to comprehend and deal with their diseases. By reading their bloodsucking tendencies as the result of a medical experiment, rather than of mythical origin, viewers are more inclined to attempt to understand the nature of the symptoms being presented.

Conclusion

Moving away from the romantic aspect of the vampire as a supernatural being, each of these three films – *The Addiction*, *Let The Right One In*, and *Trouble Every Day* – de-mystify those who crave human blood so their actions are seen more as the side effects of their illness. As a result, these characters draw attention not because of their special powers, but because of their struggle to understand the nature of their disease. Sympathy is thus invoked by suggestions of melancholy and isolation through both narrative and stylistic techniques. In *The Addiction*, Kathleen's melancholy is caused by her frustration at being unable to understand the nature of her addiction. Feelings of isolation in particular are highlighted by the film's black and white appearance, emphasising the shadows created around Kathleen's situation. Similarly, *Let The Right One In*'s style, depicting the Stockholm winter's short hours of sunlight, underscores the film's melancholic attitude toward the cruelty of human beings, both adults and children, making the designated monster of the film seem significantly less monstrous than its secondary, human, characters. Finally, *Trouble Every Day* offers extended, virtually silent, shots of its characters in the film's Parisian setting, all of them appearing lost amongst its disconnected images of isolation owing to the lethal illness of two primary characters.

In each of these situations, sympathy is called for by the vampires' roles as protagonists, allowing viewers to witness their respective struggles to come to terms with the nature of the illnesses being portrayed.

Notes

1 In *Dread: How fear and fantasy have fueled epidemics from the Black Death to avian flu*, Philip Alcabes (2009:2) notes: 'at almost the same time as Murnau was filming the plague-carrying vampire rising out of a rat-infested ship's hold to spread disease, public-health authorities were using scientific knowledge to curtail real plague epidemics in Paris and Los Angeles.'

2 While *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was released two years prior to Interview, it was not until the second season of the television series (Whedon 1997 -2003) that the vampire Angel (David Boreanaz) was introduced as a sympathetic figure.

3 Candace Benefiel references Anne Rice's biographer who reveals that writing *Interview with the Vampire* was Rice's way of dealing with the loss of her daughter to leukemia. Benefiel (2004:266) suggests that her near-breakdown is represented by a character in the novel – 'an insane Parisian dollmaker who yearns obsessively for her own dead daughter'.

4 Currently comprising *Twilight* (Hardwicke 2008), *New Moon* (Weitz 2009), *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse* (Slade 2010), and *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1* (Condon 2011), with *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2*, also directed by Condon, due out in late 2012.

5 Peina refers to writer William S Burroughs whose work was greatly influenced by heroin addiction: 'Have you read *Naked Lunch*? Burroughs perfectly describes what it's like to go without a fix.'

6 When the film was released in 1995, heroin addiction had already been at been a prevalent concern in the United States for several years. For example, in 1971, four years before the end of the Vietnam War, statistics show that 10-15 per cent please of American servicemen were addicted to heroin (Heroin Statistics). When the film was released more than twenty years later, the number of users was still rising: a survey looking at what American drug users were spending on their addictions between 1988 and 2000 showed that somewhere between $10 and $23 billion was spent on heroin during the 1990s alone, and in 1995 there were an estimated 428,000 occasional and 923,000 chronic heroine users in the United States (Drug Availability). Likewise, the HIV/AIDS crisis, first recognised in the early 1980s, continued to be a prominent concern by the mid-1990s when the film was released.

7 There is also the implication that he was her former lover before he grew old, suggesting that he is what Oskar will eventually become.

8 This next take is more than a minute long, which can be compared to the final attack scene in *Twilight* – heavy on close up shots, each take lasts no more than ten seconds. While the effect of *Twilight*'s quick reaction shots is to show the viewer exactly how each character is feeling, the long takes and long shots in *Let The Right One In* allow the viewer to be a simple observer, watching the scene unfold without giving away the answers.

9 Philippe Met's (2003) article "Looking for trouble: The dialectics of lack and excess" notes some of the film's 'obligatory horror genre motifs—an unexplained curse, bestial or monstrous behaviour, scientific hubris, brain dissection, a chainsaw …'.

References

Alcabes, P. 2009. *Dread: How fear and fantasy have fueled epidemics from the Black Death to avian flu*. New York: Public Affairs.

Alfredson, T (dir). 2008. *Let the Right One in*. [Film]. Sandrew Metronome. DVD.

Ashida, T (dir). 1985. *Vampire Hunter D*. [Film]. Urban Vision Entertainment. DVD.

Baker, RW (dir). 1970. *The Vampire Lovers*. [Film]. Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer. DVD.

Benefiel, CR. 2004. Blood relations: The Gothic perversion of the nuclear family in Anne Rice's Interview with the Vampire. *Journal of Popular Culture* 38(2), November:261-73.

Brenez, N. 2007. *Abel Ferrara*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Browning, T (dir). 1931. *Dracula*. [Film]. Universal Pictures. DVD.

Butler, E. 2010. *Metamorphoses of the vampire in literature and film*. Rochester, New York: Camden House.

Coppola, FF (dir). 1992. *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. [Film]. Columbia Pictures. DVD.

Crain, W (dir). 1972. *Blacula*. [Film]. American International Pictures. DVD.

Denis, C (dir). 2001. *Trouble Every Day*. [Film]. Panorama Entertainment. DVD.

Downing, L. 2007. Re-viewing the sexual relation: Levinas and film. *Film-Philosophy* 11(2):49-65.

Drug Availability Steering Committee. 2002. What Americas Users Spend on Illegal Drugs. *Drug Availability Estimates*. [O]. Available: www.ncjrs.gov/ondcppubs/publications/pdf/drugavailability.pdf
Accessed 3 January 2011.

Ferrara, A (dir). *The Addiction*. 1995. [Film]. October Films.

Fisher, T (dir). 1958. *Horror of Dracula*. [Film]. Universal Pictures. DVD.

Franco, J (dir). 1971. *Vampyros Lesbos*. [Film]. Exclusivas Floralva Distribucion S.A. DVD.

Gunn, B (dir). 1993. *Ganja and Hess*. [Film]. All Day Entertainment. DVD.

Hardwicke, C (dir). 2008. *Twilight*. [Film]. Summit Entertainment. DVD.

Heroin statistics. [O]. Available: www.heroinaddiction.info/Heroin_Statistics.htm
Accessed 3 January 2011.

Jackson, K. 2010. "The vampire next door." *Sight and Sound* 19(11), November:40-44.

Jameson, F. 1992. *Reification and utopia in mass culture. Signatures of the visible*. New York: Routledge.

Jordan, N (dir). 1994. *Interview with the vampire.* [Film]. Warner Bros. DVD.

Kane, T. 2006. *The changing vampire of film and television: a critical study of the growth of a genre*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland.

Lafond, F. 2008. Tod Browning vs. George Melford: Dracula's doppelgänger, in *The Cinema of Tod Browning: Essays of the Macabre and Grotesque*, edited by B Herzogenrath. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland:151-157.

Kumel, H (dir). 1971. *Daughters of darkness*. [Film]. Blue Underground. DVD.

Kuzui, FR (dir). 1002. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.* [Film]. 20th Century Fox. DVD.

Lau, R (dir). 1985. *Mr. Vampire*. [Film]. Golden Harvest. DVD.

Met, P. 2011. Looking for trouble: the dialectics of lack and excess. *Kinoeye* 3(7), June. [O]. Available: www.kinoeye.org/03/07/met07.php. Accessed 27 February 2011.

Morrey, D. 2004. Textures of terror: Claire Denis' Trouble Every Day. *Belephegor* 3(2), April. [O]. Available: http://etc.dal.ca/belphegor/vol3_no2/articles/03_02_Morrey_textur_fr.html Accessed: 27 February 2011.

Murnau, FW (dir). 1922. *Nosferatu*. [Film]. Film Arts Guild. DVD.

Norrington, S (dir). 1998. *Blade*. [Film]. New Line Cinema. DVD.

Schopp, A. 1997. Cruising the alternatives: homoeroticism and the contemporary vampire. *Journal of Popular Culture* 30(4), Spring:231-43.

Shumacher, J (dir). 1987. *The Lost Boys.* [Film]. Warner Bros. DVD.

Slade, D (dir). 2010. *Eclipse*. [Film]. Summit Entertainment. DVD.

Spielberg, S (dir). 1975. *Jaws*. [Film]. Universal Pictures. DVD.

Waller, GA. 1986. *The living and the undead: from Stoker's Dracula to Romero's Dawn of the Dead.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Weiss, A. 1992. *Vampires and violets: lesbians in the cinema*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Weitz, C (dir). 2009. *New Moon*. [Film]. Summit Entertainment. DVD.

Whedon, J (dir). 1997-2003. The WB, 1997-2001, UPN 2001-2003. DVD.