

ALLEGORIES OF VAMPIRE CINEMA

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Allegories of Vampire Cinema is a theoretical film essay involving the issue of spectator relations to vampire films before, during, and after viewings. The piece closely examines which character the spectators are truly meant to connect with. This is an interesting and important issue to raise as it offers a new analysis that had not previously been explored, aligning the spectators not with the protagonists of these stories, but with the vampire itself. In my research, I gathered dozens of books, magazine articles, and journal entries to delve deeply into the horror genre and vampire subgenre. I also screened over three dozen vampire films, though only a handful are cited directly. The essay was pieced together from the beginning of January through March when, upon completion, I presented my findings at the 2008 PCA/ACA National Conference in San Francisco. Implications that are brought to light upon the revelation that the spectator is being aligned with vampires include the notion that the vampire film may not be an isolated case. With further study, theories and analyses may bring about spectator relations and alignments with not only a myriad of other antagonistic horror icons, but antagonists throughout the entire scope of film.

Many authors have sought to lend insight into the metaphorical relationship between the vampire, their victims, and even their spectators. On the spectators of horror films in general, Joseph Biggs and Dennis Petrie offer that "...one goes to the horror film in order to have a nightmare... a dream whose undercurrent of anxiety both presents and masks the desire to fulfill and be punished for certain conventionally unacceptable impulses (Biggs & Petrie, 2008, p. 484)." It is their position that the spectators of horror view these films due to a subconscious desire to see their "unacceptable impulses" played out by the monster (in our discussion, vampires) and to be punished for the surrogate actions that the monster plays out in our stead. In regards to the vampire, Jorg Waltje sees our clear alignment with the vampire as soon as we sit down in the theater. He explains:

"The vampire only comes out in the dark and spends the rest of the time in his coffin. The spectators voluntarily sit in a coffin (the darkened cinema), watching a screen on which not only light but also (within and between every frame) darkness is projected (Waltje, 2000, p. 29)."

While I agree that this is a startlingly clear example of our relationship to the vampire, this vampire-spectator relationship can be further clarified through a common iconographical object in most of these films in a way that has not as yet been established.

Lacan's famous mirror stage is one of his pillars of seeking out the moment when the identity of a child in relation to itself begins to develop. "The child... can already recognize as such his own image in a mirror. This recognition is indicated in the illuminative mimicry of the *Aha- Erlebnis*... This event can take place... from the age of six months... up to the age of eighteen months (Lacan, 2004, p. 441-442)." *Aha*, you may say, *but the vampire casts no reflection, does it not?* Stoker himself, Dracula's keeper, has been the catalyst for your exclamation: "This time there could be no error, for the man was close to me, and I could see him over my shoulder. But there was no reflection of him in the mirror (Stoker, 2003, p. 30-31)!" So what would Dracula's answer to Lacan's mirror stage be in fact? Fiona Peters states:

"Vampires have no need for an unconscious- nor can they be seen in mirrors because they do not need to rely on the process of identifications that Lacan describes; in other words they have not become formed as human subjects, and in the case of those who become vampires after being human... they have evaded the symbolic order... (Peters, 2006, p. 180)"

In Peters' argument, humans who become vampires have separated and transcended themselves from the symbolism that is the vampire to become one of them. Interesting... My question for Peters would be *What if someone was a vampire and didn't know it? Must they still graduate from the fully-fledged human's mirror stage?* I believe they do. But who ever heard of someone not knowing that they are in fact a vampire? Perhaps my line of questions has no value... I believe Slavoj Žižek had it right when he said, "It is therefore clear why vampires are invisible to the mirror: because they have read Lacan and, consequently, know how to behave... (Žižek, 19992, p. 126)"

Christian Metz's groundbreaking work in *The Imaginary Signifier* is the starting point from which I will make clear the metaphorical truth behind the absence of the vampire from the mirror. He theorizes that "...film is like a mirror... (Metz, 2000, p. 410)." He goes on to explain that, "...although... everything comes to be projected, there is one thing, and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator's own body (Metz, 2000)." If this is true, then perhaps we have not developed our identification inside of this film-mirror through Lacan's mirror stage. Metz responds, "... what *makes possible* the spectator's absence- is the fact that the spectator has already known the experiences of the mirror... (Metz, 2000, p. 411)" Later he adds that because of this, "The spectator has the opportunity to identify with the *character* of the fiction (Metz, 2000, p. 411)." I'm not entirely convinced though that it is a simple identification that we are meant to make.

It is through Žižek and Metz though that my claim is ready to be revealed: the mirrors in which vampires cannot be seen are analogous to the film-mirror that we encounter when we go to the cinema to view one of these films. As such, it is clear that not only are we aligned with the vampire through the space we enter and the darkness we become enveloped in as Waltje has claimed earlier, but we *are* the vampires that we see in front of us. It is not a mythic, undead man with phallic teeth that we are being warned against; the vampire is our subconsciously primal sexual and violent desires, and we are seeing our mirrored selves in its eyes. *We* do not identify with the fictional character as supposed by Metz though; it is the vampire who is identifying with us.



Our vampire cannot be seen inside of the mirror.

Metz also adds that there is not only some sort of relationship between spectators and characters in the films but also with the equipment that films employ as well, “...the spectator can do no other than identify with the camera, too, which has looked before him at what he is now looking at... (Metz, 2000, p. 413-414)” This can be seen as an explanation of our absence from the film-mirror as well. If it is true that we see what the camera before us has seen, then the camera is, in fact, a surrogate for our sight in our absence from the set. What is projected upon the screen then, is our vision returning to us. This is only appropriate in regards to our absence because, supposing we were there to witness the acts being displayed for us on the screen, we wouldn’t be able to see ourselves then either. So, if the screen, or film-mirror, is actually casting our own reflection when we see the vampire, then it is safe to assume that when the vampire looks into the mirror, s/he

must see us, and, when they do, they often react violently upon this reflection, frequently shattering the glass. But why?

If the vampire is meant to be “the embodiment of human evil (Wright, 1974, p. 45),” and/ or “the incarnation of unbridled sensuality (Wright, 1974, p. 45),” as Judith Hess Wright claims, then perhaps the vampire destroys the mirror because it sees in that instant that it is only one fragment of who we are and/ or who we can become and the idea that we have a choice to leave the theatre and its darkness behind is more than the vampire in us can bear. We have let the vampire in us escape into the screen for a few hours and when we drag it kicking and screaming, pushing it back down into our subconscious realm, it reacts in the same way a two year old reacts when hearing the word “no.”

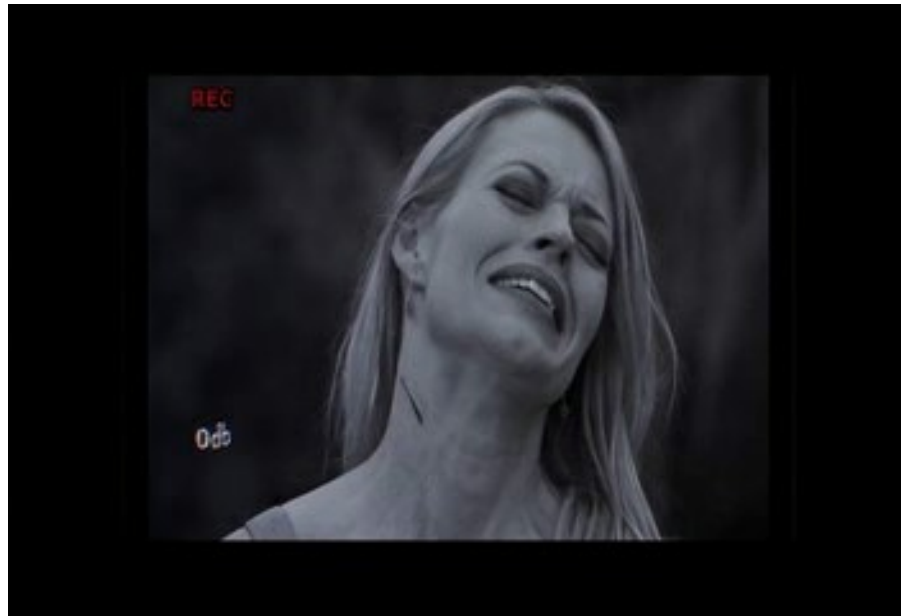
Through this, Žižek’s joke about vampires having read and/ or at least having gone through Lacan’s mirror stage holds more weight than he probably surmised when adding it to the page because, in fact, *we* all have. Waltje’s earlier claim is unfinished. He goes on to say, “Having turned themselves [the spectators] into vampires, they are waiting for the film-vampire to come out and join them (Waltje, 2000, p. 29).” This is actually a half-truth. We spectators are merely waiting for the vampire within us to have its fun and then *rejoin* us once we see that side of us punished for its desires by the protagonists that we thrust it against. Matthew Bunson explains the vampire’s aversion to mirrors in *The Vampire Encyclopedia*:

“Folklore for this aversion stem from the concept that a mirror also reflects a soul, and evil beings have no soul to reflect. It has also been argued that the bloodsuckers actually exist in two worlds, that of the living and that of the dead. As it is in neither world completely, it will not be seen in a mirror (Bunson, 1993, p. 176-177).”

Without us, the vampire wouldn’t have a soul to reflect, as it is nothing more than a decimal without our complete presence. Also, as I have just outline, the vampire does indeed live in two worlds. Apart from us, acting out its desires inside of the screen, it is dead. It cannot actually live without its true host. Before we release it into the screen and after we trap it once again after the film, it is a part of our whole and, as such, is alive with us.

It is also interesting to note that this spectator-screen-vampire relationship has not gone unnoticed and that films since Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* have actually taken this dynamic a step further than only showing us the vampire’s absence from the mirror. Patrick Lussier’s *Dracula 2000* includes a scene in which a young, voluptuous reporter (Valerie Sharpe) and her cameraman are attacked by Dracula. As the attack begins, the camera man sees Valerie seize up, and her neck is suddenly sliced open though no cause can be seen through the lens of the camera. Sharpe flees into the news van and watches in horror as Dracula manhandles her colleague. As she watches on the video monitor receiving the feed

from the camera, Dracula is absent from the screen. He is absent from this film-mirror just as we are absent from the film-mirror in front of us.



Valerie Sharpe is attacked.



The cameraman is being attacked by Dracula though he cannot be seen on the screen.

In *Shadow of the Vampire* (E. Elias Merhige, 2000), Max Schreck is fictionalized as being a real vampire during the filming of Murnau's *Nosferatu*. In a pivotal moment of the film, Schreck encounters a projector on his own, without the interference of Murnau and his crew. Stacey Abbott describes the scene:

“Like a child amongst toys, he curiously begins to crank the lever resulting in an image of a sunrise being projected onto the wall. While he is transfixed by the sight of the first sunrise he has seen in centuries, the sequence changes meaning as soon as Schreck instinctively places his hand before the lens in order to protect his shadow on the screen. This equipment captures and projects a part of himself (Abbott, 2004, p. 3).”

The vampire, in this scene, is seeing what it is to be the whole without us. His shadow, the part of himself that Abbot is referring to, is representative of the vampire as part of us cast upon the screen.

It is not a surprise that in spite of this essay's claims, people will continue to flock to the theatres to unleash their inner vampires every time a new vampire film is released. For lovers of these films, it is a necessary evil, a period of time when they can allow these subconscious desires to manifest themselves before their eyes, relieving the tension that bottling these desires creates. Nina Auerbach shares that “...what vampires are in any given generation is a part of what I am... (Auerbach, 1995, p. 1)” Do not be afraid of the vampires that reveal themselves to you on the screen. Be afraid if you find yourself trapped in the darkness of the theatre, unable to bottle them back inside once the credits have rolled.

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