



RE-RELEASES

Vampyr

The premiere of Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* took place in Berlin in May 1932 almost exactly four years after the first showing of his previous film, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. After so long a wait, expectations were running high but the title made some people worry that Dreyer had been swept up in the fashion for horror unleashed in 1931 with the release of the three great classics *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

Vampyr is indeed a tale of horror. Yet Dreyer had not jumped on any horror bandwagon, wrote his friend Ebbe Neergaard in an article published at the same time as the film's premiere. *Vampyr* was shot in mid-1930, well before the three Hollywood horror movies had gone into production. Moreover, Dreyer took a subtler approach to cinematic horror. Neergaard compares the depiction of violent incidents to Greek tragedy, where deaths occur off-stage and are reported by messengers, while Dreyer worked through reaction shots: 'The facial expressions of the witnesses are the messengers here', wrote Neergaard. He also concedes however that while the horror-value of off-screen death is diminished, Dreyer's 'visual and psychological' indirection has the opposite effect, working in a suggestive, imagination-stirring way; there is something diabolical about Dreyer's delicate discretion.'

Dreyer's film never established a grip on the collective imagination the way the famous movie monsters of 1931 did, and it has never been a popular or widely-seen picture. On the other hand, constant imitation and parody have not diminished its terrors and the film's eerie atmosphere remains nightmarish and potent. As the young Marcel Carné, then a critic for *Ciné-Magazine*, wrote when the film premiered in Paris in September 1932: 'A genius of a both diabolical and mysterious kind bursts forth in these muted, oppressive images – as the juice seeps from an overripe fruit.' How did Dreyer create this sense of uncanny menace?

After *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1927), Dreyer was looking to do something different. With the help of Nicolas de Gunzburg, a wealthy sponsor who was willing to put up the money to make a feature on condition that he could play the lead role himself, Dreyer became his own producer. He initially decided to make a film *policier*, a thriller, reading extensively to familiarise himself with the subject, but became increasingly attracted to the idea of making a supernatural horror story instead.

He based the plot loosely on 'Carmilla', a tale by the 19th-century Irish ghost-story writer J. Sheridan Le Fanu, and the film features many gothic elements: the lonely castle, the old father with his two beautiful daughters, the literary tone of the intertitles and of course the vampire motif which struck some contemporaries as absurdly old-fashioned. In 'this vacuum-cleaner age', where the dusty corners of superstition had been thoroughly cleaned out, wrote one Danish reviewer, the vampire theme 'seems more quaint than suggestive.'

Dreyer cleverly refuted charges of quaintness through some distinctively modern touches. He carefully dressed the characters in contemporary clothes (particularly the slightly dandyish hero in his sleek suit), and shot the film entirely on location. This was partly to save money on studio rentals (Dreyer

worked slowly and did not want to be bound by a strict shooting schedule), but also to give substance and verisimilitude to the supernatural and the unreal. He rented an uninhabited and dilapidated chateau, and the cast and crew all lived together in the musty, rat-infested pile. Shooting began around 1 April, 1930, and continued until October in what seems to have been an oppressive and uncomfortable atmosphere.

Renée Mandel who plays Gisèle the innocent heroine told an interviewer that Dreyer 'thought of nothing except the film' and spoke of the way Dreyer had 'dominated' her: 'I acted as if under hypnosis... I had the gestures of a sleepwalker... Under his direction, it was as if I was in a perpetual dream, half conscious, half insensible... It was delightful... but perhaps dangerous... because it is perhaps not artistically proper that an actor should submit to so overpowering an authority.'

Dreyer's assistant Eliane Tayara later recounted various anecdotes of Dreyer's obsessive concern for realistic detail. He wanted the house of the vampire's helper filled with actual cobwebs, not imitations of any sort. Tayara and another assistant had to round up large numbers of spiders, feed them by attracting flies and ants with honey and the rotting carcass of a mole, and get them to spin their webs in the right places. Miraculously, they succeeded and Dreyer was pleased with the result, even if setting up the lights and camera for the actual shooting without disturbing the delicate webs posed another challenge. Another example of Dreyer's exacting attention to detail was his insistence that the hand of the skeleton holding a poison bottle which the hero sees in a dream had to belong to a female skeleton.

Dreyer drew on the fine arts to shape the mood of the film. Many years later he explained to his biographer Dale Drum that he was deeply interested in abstract art and had been greatly influenced by 'the excitement, the energy, the variety' of the avant-garde movements in Paris in the late 1920s. He also drew inspiration from past masters. Renée Mandel mentioned that Dreyer often showed her reproductions of Goya's paintings: "I want," said Dreyer, "to create a film of this kind".'

Vampyr was made soon after the arrival of talking pictures, and Dreyer found his own very particular way of adapting to the new medium of sound. After studying sound technology in England in the fall of 1929, Dreyer decided that it would be feasible to shoot the picture silent and then post-synchronise the entire soundtrack. The actors would speak their lines in three languages so that their lip movements matched dialogue in French, German, and English which was to be recorded later. It was quite common in the early years of the sound cinema to try to overcome the language barriers by making multiple versions of the same film in different languages, but this was usually done by using different actors.

The post-recording of the sound, which was done in Berlin, took much longer than Dreyer anticipated. He edited the film during the last months of 1930 and screened a working print for a select audience at the end of the year, but only in June 1931 was he able to begin work on the soundtrack. The film was not shown to the public until the premiere of the German version in May 1932.

Dreyer had decided from the start that he wanted a film where the dialogue was pared down to a minimum. He worked very closely with the innovative film composer Wolfgang Zeller who carefully coordinated the music with the sound effects and the dialogue. Zeller's music is impressionistic in style, more

atmospheric than dramatic, and its subdued but insistently menacing tone contributes powerfully to the film's disquieting ambience.

The visual style and the story structure of *Vampyr* are even more disconcerting. The strange, milky half-light that envelops the film, particularly the exteriors, was created by shooting in the daytime, putting black netting in front of the camera lens and reflecting light on to it with mirrors. According to Neergaard, this style grew out of Dreyer's concern for psychological realism: he sought to create the actual experience of night-time darkness unlike the deep, inky shadows a more conventional filmmaker might have used: 'The night is only black in comparison with the daytime; in the night, the relation between light and shadow is roughly the same as during the day, and when the eye has become used to the darkness, the night is merely indistinct in a muted, watery way.' Whether or not this is perceptually accurate, the effect is odd and unreal, particularly in the many scenes in the film where characters hold up candles and other light sources which never seem to shed any illumination. And of course when shadows appear in the film they are rarely cast by ordinary objects but instead have an independent, otherworldly existence.

The film is visually disorienting in another way. Dreyer's camera moves about a great deal, often panning in the direction the characters are looking, making us think that it is adopting their point of view but then suddenly revealing that they are in an entirely different place from where we thought they were.

This unpredictability is also reflected on the level of the story. *Vampyr* does not adhere to any genre conventions and we have very little idea where the story is going or how the various events fit together. This was a deliberate strategy on Dreyer's part: 'Why not present [the spectator] with the events in the incoherent, fragmentary manner they assume for us in real life, forcing our minds to reconstruct them in order to make sense of them?'

More than once, Dreyer referred to the film as 'a waking dream'. The fantastic, he believed, was in ourselves, our own subconscious: 'If we have been brought to a state of excitement by some event or other, there is no limit to where our imagination can take us or what strange meanings we can give to the real things that surround us.' The film's intertitles ascribe precisely this kind of mental state to the hero: 'Lights and shadows, voices and faces seemed to take on hidden meaning.'

Vampyr is designed to make us think in the same way, to make our imagination run riot and see death (or worse) lurking everywhere. No one has come closer than Dreyer to showing what it is like to believe in vampires, to experience the blurring of the line between the real and the supernatural. That is what makes *Vampyr* so subtly but persistently terrifying.

Caspar Tybjerg, *Sight & Sound*, September 2008

VAMPYR (VAMPYR DER TRAUM DES ALLAN GRAY)

Director: Carl Th. Dreyer

Production Companies: Carl Theodor Dreyer-Filmproduktion, Tobis-Filmkunst

Producers: Carl Th. Dreyer, Nicolas de Gunzburg

Assistant Directors: Ralph Holm, Éliane Tayara, Preben Birk

Screenplay: Carl Th. Dreyer, Christen Jul

German Dialogue: Paul Falkenberg

Inspired by the stories of: Sheridan Le Fanu

Director of Photography: Rudolph Maté

Camera Assistant: Louis Née

Editor: Carl Th. Dreyer

Art Directors: Hermann Warm, Hans Bittmann, Cesare Silvagni

Music: Wolfgang Zeller

Sound: Hans Bittmann

English Titles: Herman G. Weinberg *

Cast

Julian West (*Allan Gray*)

Henriette Gérard (*Marguerite Chopin*)

Sybille Schmitz (*Léone*)

Renée Mandel (*Gisèle*)

Maurice Schutz (*Bernard, lord of the manor*)

Jan Hieronimko (*Marc, the doctor*)

Jane Mora (*nurse*)

Albert Bras (*Joseph, servant at the manor*)

N. Babanini (*Jeanne, housekeeper*)

Germany/France 1932

75 mins

* Uncredited

RE-RELEASES**Croupier**

From Wed 4 May

Vampyr

Thu 5 May Preview 18:15; Mon 23 May 14:00 Seniors' Matinee + discussion

From Fri 20 May

Cabaret

From Fri 6 May

Get Carter + The Frighteners: The Manipulators

Mon 30 May 18:00 + intro by Douglas Weir, BFI Technical Delivery Manager

From Fri 27 May

NEW RELEASES**The Northman**

From 22 April

Ennio

From 22 April

Firebird

From 22 April

We're All Going to the World's Fair

From 29 April

The Velvet Queen: Snow Leopard

From 6 May

Vortex

Tue 10 May 18:00 Preview + intro by Gaspar Noé

From Fri 13 May

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