



Vampire Optics

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An exploration of the screen vampire's special relationship with light, as manifested via an array of cinematographic properties. From reflection to refraction, shadow to shimmer, multicolor to monochrome, and focus to fog: the vampire's optical instability mirrors its flickering connection to meaning.





NOTE: Video contains some strobing effects.

Creator's Statement

“Vampire Optics” is based on a chapter from my book *Visceral Screens: Mediation and Matter in Horror Cinema* (2021). As such, it revisits key ideas from that work, exploring how the vampire’s aesthetic forms are shaped and defined cinematographically and how optical figures and fluctuations reflect the creature’s unstable relationship to meaning. My aims with this video were: first, to explore and extend the argument mapped out in the original chapter by engaging with additional film examples; second, to engineer a rich sensory engagement with the key forms and features of vampire cinema; and third, to elicit unanticipated aesthetic and conceptual connections by juxtaposing vampiric images and sounds. Ultimately, I think these aims were fulfilled in three key areas.

Density

The vampire film’s manifestations of mediated light are aesthetically striking yet often fleeting: a flare, a flicker, a momentary refraction. With its tendency towards bricolage, the video essay format allows for the collation and commingling of these fleeting effects. In the process, it uncovers micro-connections and hidden filiations between films from different decades and production contexts. Here, patterns, colors, and gestures can be carried across from one example to another in ways that elude the conventional written essay, producing serendipitous linkages. The video essay thus gave me the opportunity to explore a dense network of aesthetic moments from across the history of vampire cinema. As a result, “Vampire Optics” illustrates the variety of ways in which mediated light manifests in vampire cinema, interacting with and transforming material textures.

Rhythm

In the voiceover, I use the metaphor of flicker to address the vampire's ontological instability and uncertain relationship to meaning. However, the process of editing together a varied corpus of material generated aesthetic oscillations in ways that I had not anticipated. Images of vampires appearing and disappearing, of their characteristic flourishes and hesitations, of rapid movement and uncanny stillness: these produced a collective pulse with its own distinctive rhythm. The films I have drawn upon span a wide range of aesthetic and narrative approaches and observe a bewildering array of contradictory "rules" when it comes to the vampire's ontology (as I suggest in the video). Nonetheless, this uncanny rhythmic pulse seems to capture a recurrent element, a kind of vampiric vibration that indexes the creature's movements between speed and slowness, light and shadow, control and disorder, alternately eluding and overwhelming human perception.

Sound

With its intensive focus on optics, my essay ostensibly has little to say about sound as a property of the vampire. However, editing together footage from across the history of vampire cinema necessitated grappling with the "problem" of sound. Individual clips were often accompanied by dramatic bursts of audio effects or music. How to cut this material together without generating a clamorous mess? Initially, the answer was to overlay my own alternative musical accompaniment to set the tone and to smooth transitions between clips. Although much of this accompaniment has remained in place, I also found myself reintegrating more of the original film soundtracks, discovering recurrent patterns that paralleled the rhythmic oscillations of vampire optics. These included romantic and sublimely dissonant musical scores, vocal exclamations and eruptions of mechanical noise, and also distinctive wavering tones, such as the sonic "shimmering" that sometimes accompanies the vampire's dazzling appearance or its dissolution into batlike shadowy forms. Perhaps the flickering of vampire optics here finds its counterpart in a kind of vampire sonics, in which oscillating frequencies signal the monster's potential to exceed conventional sensory and ontological limits.

Biography

Allan Cameron is an associate professor in media and screen studies at the University of Auckland. He is the author of *Visceral Screens: Mediation and Matter in Horror Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press) and *Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema* (Palgrave Macmillan) and co-editor, with Martine Beugnet and Arild Fetveit, of *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty* (Edinburgh University Press). His work has also

appeared in various edited collections and in journals including *JCMS*, *Cinema Journal*, *MIRAJ*, *Horror Studies*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, and *The Velvet Light Trap*.

Review by Seán Cubitt, University of Melbourne

The undead haunt all media: the cinema is not alone but it is one of the most haunted of them all. Cameron's video essay lifts a veil on a long history—including a brief glimpse of *The Arrival of a Train* (Lumière Brothers, 1896) in the background of Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992)—and a history of technique from Dreyer's double exposure to Amirpour's adjustments to shutter speed. Lustre and spectre converge but, as we learn in the first sequence, always at a threshold: a depicted frame, the frame of the screen, the screen surface that so fascinated Cronenberg (an auteur who doesn't make the cut, correctly: he dabbled in, never fell for, the vampiric). Other ephemeral thresholds appear and disappear: foregrounds and backgrounds, staged actions and interruptions to seeing them, areas of the image emphasized and others blocked in part or wholly. In more recent vampire films, close-miking and extreme amplification of body sounds—sucking, scratching, exhaling—make sound more tactile. Cameron's righteous microscopy of light makes the parallel point: imagery of blood cells and ECUs of mouths, eyes, and wounds make imagery tangible (if sometimes repulsive). Editing—cutting—emphasizes the same, ripping darkness open so a blinding flash disables monster and spectator—another threshold. The viewer is always suspect in these movies: the voyeur whose gaze penetrates the curtain, traverses the glass, but is always invisible in the cinematic mirror. Ask Marilyn Monroe and a thousand dead starlets about vampires. Even so, in the flickering dark of the auditorium, those bloodsucking audiences, even when they cast capes over their eyes, even when they fled the houselights, knew they were guilty. The worse vampire is the one who now, illuminated by their LCDs, stands unmoved in the sunlight. The more cyborg we become, the more we will suck electricity and code, and the viral infection become just another meme. What price the undead when database memories are immortal? The vampire may be more than cinematic, but will it survive the end of cinema? Perhaps, but only in another kind of black box.

Review by Murray Leeder, University of Alberta

It is nice to see more formal analyses of the vampire film that really hone in on a few pertinent aspects—those things we always knew were there but could not quite articulate until Dr. Cameron is so good as to tell, and show, it to us. It might be interesting to see how these observations might compare with the representations of other supernatural beings. I would imagine few of these points would apply to werewolves but quite a lot of them would fit with ghosts or demons. Cornerstones of this analysis are particularly

spectral representations of the vampire, e.g. *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Vampyr* (1932), but one of this video essay's major accomplishments is showing just how the same principles extend to more embodied vampires, such as those in *Near Dark* (1987). The different visual strategies that separate out vampires and werewolves, say, in movies where they comingle (as in the *Twilight* and *Underworld* franchises), might serve as further proof of the vampire's specifically optical character. I also might be interesting to look at those less-supernatural vampire films, like *Vampire's Kiss* (1988), where a failure to actualize these optical conventions provide ambiguity about the character's true nature. This video essay briefly includes a clip from *Martin* (1977) where the title character is actually posing as a classical supernatural vampire as a prank; most of the film presents him through banal realist aesthetics to mark him as a highly-delusional contemporary serial killer.

There are so many interesting films cited here that there is scarcely time to unpack them all. I would single *Nadja* (1994) in the use of Pixelvision for vampire POV, paradoxically presenting heightened senses through fuzzy, less-detailed images. It always seemed to me a kind of commentary on the process of representing the unrepresentable.

As a video essay, it is very effectively moody and smooth. The score is particularly strong, and every editing choice seem well-judged. I particularly like the use of that fade-to-red from *Daughters of Darkness* (1971), a glorious visualization of bloodthirst overwhelming the cinematic apparatus, which is put to great use here.

