

## A Duel of Shine and Shadow

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*I spent a year studying under Bjarne earning a MScR degree focusing on narrative and genre in crime fiction and fantasy horror fiction works, both literature and film. Excited by the rich history of fable and folklore in Danish and other Nordic cultures, I keyed in on classic and modern works alike, spanning Benjamin Christensen and Victor Sjöström to contemporaries such as Lars von Trier and Tomas Alfredsson. Among the innovative early films, *Vampyr*, stands out in particular due to a combination of visual and story cues via light and shadow that arouses our suspicion of fantasy while we look in on the travels of the young male protagonist. Bjarne's enthusiasm for this film and many others encouraged me to partake on later study specifically discussing narration qualities in a few early, Nordic horror films.*

Light and dark, objective and subjective. Either/or, but with a space between? Like the gauze pulled over his camera lens to set the visual atmosphere, Carl Theodor Dreyer, in his 1932 film, *Vampyr*, casts a haze over our clear impression of the mysterious events of Allan Gray's nocturnal encounters and their meaning in the sense of an orderly, concrete understanding of life experiences.

A studious and enthusiastic traveller himself, our guide soon encounters an unknown visitor, an unintelligible warning, and an unopened parcel. Gray senses a plea for assistance and ventures

out, only to find himself drawn into a vampire's cruel seduction and capture of two young sisters with the aid of an enabling doctor. We move along with Gray, investigating the activities of a cohort of witches, ghosts, shadows, and a vampire through the contours of a countryside village and its residents. But beyond the explicit narrative of Dreyer's supernatural story, the optic vicissitudes of shine and shadow slowly dance before us in this tale of investigation and discovery, evoking brooding questions and challenging settled notions about things known and unknown.

As we follow Gray and others in their attempts to ward off the vampire, we are as much looking at their soft-focus shadows as themselves in each frame. Although it is a black-and-white film, in nearly every shot, light shining upon each actor generates a shadow on the background set, used both in the fabulaic sense, such as to depict Gray's engagement with the supernatural when he witnesses dancing shadows on the wall of an uninhabited house interior, and in the metaphorical sense, such as to denote the constant accompaniment of mystery and unease to our concrete and objective notions of space and time. Dreyer's film exploits this visual motif to impose an anxiety about unnatural, unreal, or otherwise indeterminate experiences, not only of Gray and others within his narrative but also inclusive of our own, human experiences, beyond those which are easily explained. Shadows partake in activities such as playing music and dancing, performing manual labour like digging, opening and closing doors, and even shooting a rifle. While we do not see the character from which the shadow emanates in the frame, the visuals imply a disembodiment of the shadow from its antecedent.

For maximum effect, a late sequence depicts Gray's shadow rising from a park bench while its host slumbers, shortly after giving blood to save an ailing young woman's life. We follow Gray's shadow in an out-of-body experience through a dreamy,

future scenario foretelling the vampire asserting its grip over Gray's soul and the interment of his body in a coffin. While Gray looks at himself in a prospective future, the shadow's experience offers himself, and thus the viewers ourselves, as a metaphorical extension, a moment of hesitation, or a suggestion to think outside of our collective sense of objectivity.



This moment instigates the twitch when our head tilts slightly, or when a crack appears in the door left slightly ajar, and something from outside our understood, definitive experience creeps in, by invitation or not. Dreyer's use of light and dark directs us to follow the diegetic assertions of objectivity and subjectivity, such as through Gray's experiences in normal state and in dream state, but it is the shadows throughout that mar the obvious distinction between these dimensions. In turn, the visual foxtrot of shine and shadow fill the film and its viewers with an ever more blurred sense of real and unreal amid the

ensemble of grey hues. Even though Gray arrives at the village by boat in the darkness of night and he leaves the village walking into the glow of the day, it is the sequence, in terms of both plot and metaphor, between these checkpoints that really evokes the ponderance and wonder central to the film.

Dreyer's film is thus suggestive of an existing space between the obvious comfort of black or white, and the simple, precise nature of objectivity. A cast shadow exhibits a liminality in that its body is not tangible like wood or animal flesh, but the form appearing from blocked light rays is easily recognised by human senses. This quality lends credence to our human perception of fantastic experiences, which are not easily understood or acknowledged, and fall somewhere between fully objective or subjective. The fantastic begs us to evaluate the far reaches of our 'safe haven' notions of what is and is not.

The power of the film is to invite us to revisit our own frameworks of experiential sentiment, just like Bjarne's supervision regularly forced me to critically examine my own approaches to literature and film and then test out new ones, which more often than not bore the fruit of novel strands of discourse in my thinking. Watching the film, we are invited to articulate the existence of something beyond our typical wisdom but meanwhile not altogether an abstract conception. The shine and shadow employed extensively throughout the work pose a visual interpretation of broad and complex human experiences which ask more questions than provide corresponding answers.

## Filmography

*Vampyr*. 1932. Film. Directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer. Germany: Carl Theodor Dreyer-Filmproduktion Tobis-Filmkunst.