Let the Right One In

Colin Brookes reflects on ethical and aesthetic issues between vampires and us. *Let the Right One In* (2008) was critically acclaimed internationally and received several prestigious awards. It stands out strikingly from previous vampire movies or TV series, such as the recent *Vampire Diaries*, *Twilight*, and *Being Human*. All those have origins in Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula* and draw on the numerous Hammer Horror versions of the Count’s (non-)life. But religions, folklore and their related symbolic paraphernalia are underplayed in the narrative of *Let the Right One In*: there are no crucifixes, garlic, or wooden stakes here. Absent too are an aristocratic Count, atmospheric locations, solicitors’ vulnerable fiancées, and wise physicians/vampire experts. Werewolves do not appear either – neither do fangs, even if we glimpse their punctures in flesh. We seem a long way from Bela Lugosi’s portrayal in *Dracula* (1931), or the terrifying Count Orlock in F.W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922). Although the main events in this film could be described as supernatural, they are paradoxically not treated as such. Instead they appear as ‘matter of fact’ natural events in a modern social and technological context. The everyday locations in Sweden, which are ordinary, mostly dull or dark, bleak and cold, contribute to making the weird events all the more believable. These differences have implications for how this vampire film makes us think about the nature of our own being – what are we, ultimately? For instance, although perhaps still regarded as ‘evil’, vampires are portrayed in the film less as an abhorrent species, more as humans – inextricably part of a biology that includes us. After all, our evolutionary history does distantly connect us with blood-ingesting creatures such as vampire bats and mosquitoes. In the *British Medical Journal*, Vol.343 (2011) Fineberg coins the term ‘neo-evolution’ to ask if *Homo sapiens* will ever develop the wisdom needed for the evolutionary choices that are becoming increasingly possible through genetic manipulation. Of course, those choices might go wrong, and vampires could be one result. Also, some religious practices emphasise blood and sacrifice. In the Catholic Mass, for example, some votaries believe that the wine becomes the blood of Christ – so they drink his blood. Is our human self then closer to that of a vampire than we might like to admit – all it might take to transform us is some version of transubstantiation, or an infecting bite? *Let the Right One In* seems to taunt our existential angst about our intimate evolutionary connectedness with other species, albeit only if allegorically: even if the vampire is another species, we are still linked. A vampire can scale walls, climb trees impressively, and may well fly; nevertheless, the thought lingers that we might metamorphose or otherwise be vulnerable to potential contagion, as we are to HIV, say. Contagion is the fear exploited in all vampire stories.

Love and Violence

The central characters in *Let the Right One In* are not mature adults, or even young adults or adolescents, but prepubescent twelve-year-olds: Oskar (Kare Hedebrant), bullied by others from his school, and Eli (Lina Leandersson), who, accompanied by a male adult, Håkan (Per Ragnar), moves in next door at Oskar’s stark functionalist apartment block in Blackeberg, a suburb of Stockholm. Director Tomas Alfredson focuses on the two central characters and their developing relationship. They are matched in their different vulnerabilities: Oskar is pale, blond, slight and delicately featured; Eli too seems pale, apparently fragile, with soft, gentle green eyes, all of which belie her ghastly nature as a vampire. Throughout the film, the twelve year olds are confronted with moral choices. These children (although one is a vampire!) are on their own; there’s no one else to turn to and they have to address situations themselves. For instance, Oskar has to ignore the unavoidable horror of her necessary modus operandi. His circumstances seem to have prepared him for this. Bullying and separated parents have helped spawn a lonely, obsessive interest in the gory asp vampire! are on their own; there’s no one else to turn to and they have to address situations themselves. For instance, Oskar has to ignore the unavoidable horror of her necessary modus operandi. His circumstances seem to have prepared him for this. Bullying and separated parents have helped spawn a lonely, obsessive interest in the gory asp murderer, but what kind of love? In *The Meaning of Things* (2002), A.C. Grayling reminds us of some Classical Greek words for love that might provide some insight: there is *agape* – an altruistic, selfless form of love. Accordingly, Oskar and Eli both transcend their natural states for the sake of the other. Eli transcends her nature in her relationship with Oskar by protecting him, both from others and from herself: she will not pursue him as a victim. Oskar rises above an instinctive reaction to Eli’s abhorrent acts, which to her are natural, but to him are unnatural. The pair also engage in ludus, a playful affection: they are reciprocally kind and affectionate. Examples include using Morse code at Oskar’s instigation in order to communicate through the adjoining wall of their apartments, and sharing a puzzle (a Rubik’s Cube) which Oskar offers Eli as a gift. They exhibit *storge*, a sort of loyal attachment to be found among siblings and comrades. They have at least a brush with *mania* – obsession that may be associated with sexual passion: they embrace, kiss, at one point share a bed and touch modestly and tenderly, confirming a commitment to be together, on which Oskar is especially keen, despite what Eli has told him on two occasions: “Oskar, I’m not a girl.” These characteristics of their affection can usefully be linked to their likely stages of moral development, and thus to the ethics of their relationship. Kohlberg’s so-called ‘Level 2 – Conventional Morality’ stage of psychological development seems to be the stage at which Eli and Oskar are functioning – their mutuality incorporates the values of ”trust, loyalty, respect [and] gratitude” (Helen Bee, *The Developing Child*, p.467, 1992). Their love seems to encourage an unconditional loyalty. It extends to Oskar’s confidentiality with regard to Eli’s nature and needs, as well as Eli’s extraordinary rescue of Oskar from his bullies. The local swimming pool is the scene of the most egregious of the bullies’ torments: premeditated attempts at drowning Oskar linked to threats of torture. When Oskar is on the point of drowning, Eli intervenes brutally. From under water we are aware of a commotion above the surface: then the ripped-off head of the principal bully appears, then his forearm and the hand which previously had held Oskar under the water. Eli reaches beneath the surface to lift Oskar gently to safety, and their mutual trust and loyalty is unambiguously reinforced.
Eli’s sense of justice is unequivocally vengeful, far from demonstrating a sense of fairness derived from disinterestedly-chosen principles in the manner of John Rawls. Carol Gilligan (see Bee, pp.475-476) regards the focus on justice in respect of moral development as both limited and entailing a male bias. She argues in favour of another moral orientation – that of caring – which significantly affects how moral dilemmas might be addressed. For instance, Eli’s care for Oskar takes her to frightening levels of unambiguous, summary justice: she does not need to kill, but it seems that her sense of outrage demands it. Developmentally, neither of them can function at a “principled or post-conventional level; entailing ‘social contract’ or utility, individual rights and universal ethical principles” (Bee, p.467). This seems so despite Eli’s ambiguous age – her response to Oskar’s question about her age is, “I’ve always been twelve.” Perhaps she’s just good at being twelve. Indeed, perhaps many of us are good at being twelve – I mean, at functioning at immature moral levels, and rarely (if ever) embracing more sophisticated ones, especially those entailing ‘universal ethical principles’.

The film opens with the credits against a dark background and falling snow. It draws to a close also with falling snow, but ends with Oskar on a train journey – a device that invites reflection on what has happened and how it will all be resolved (if at all). As Oskar looks wistfully out of the carriage window, we hear the familiar taps and scrapes indicating the dots and dashes of Morse code. These come from within a box at his feet, in which Eli has to travel during daylight hours. Eli spells out ‘kiss’, and with a smile Oskar responds: • – – • • • – • • • • • ie, ‘puss’ (‘small kiss’ in Swedish). Their love has not died.

**Vampires of the Imagination**

*Let the Right One In* contains many pivotal events that are ghastly and grisly in the extreme. For some, these scenes may be stomach-churning, if not gut-wrenching, although given the context they do seem artistically justified. The violent subject-matter might however be criticised as inappropriate preoccupations for film generally. Is the gruesome behaviour of vampires the right sort of topic and content to be turning our imaginations towards?

Mary Warnock traced the evolution of the concept of imagination from the eighteenth century through to the twentieth. In her book *Imagination* (1976), she writes:

“we shall not even partially understand the nature of the imagination unless we are capable of feeling at least some sympathy with that sense of vastness and of limitless freedom which characterises the creative imagination” (p.70)

Yet this highlights what could be regarded as a disquieting feature of our imagination – it knows no bounds, perhaps nothing is beyond the pale. Excessive and bizarre products of the imagination are not unprecedented. We could for instance cite the many characters in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, or the eldritch subject matter of Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*, and so on.

Carolyn Korsmeyer explores aesthetic disgust in her book *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (2011). To her, aesthetic disgust (ie, finding a work of art disgusting) is not so much a rejection of it as a powerful, visceral recognition of something significant – it’s literally a gut response. This analysis can helpfully be linked with the term ‘moral pornography’, which Joel Marks coined in *Philosophy Now* Issue 87 to characterise “the cultivation of [a particular] kind of distasteful taste.” This taste involves a self-righteously indignant yet barely disguised voyeuristic fascination with some of the most vile, depraved, or gruesome excesses of human behaviour. Marks briefly describes but does not dwell on the specific events that prompted his coining the term. Presumably to dwell on them would be to exhibit the very morally-voyeuristic features about which he is being querulous. Instead he goes on to reveal some of the more uncomfortably hypocritical and damaging implications of moral indignation. Using Korsmeyer’s and Marks’ notions, we could say that *Let the Right One In* hovers on the edge of a use of the imagination that draws on audiences’ capacities for savouring disgust, while at the same time it may for some prompt the feigning of offence to conceal their gaping delight, or anyway, their unsavoury interest in the lifestyles of the undead.

If all this seems somewhat glum, I should say that there were moments watching this movie when I wondered if we might hear Oskar at some point muttering to himself, “Just my luck, I’m bullied by other boys, my Mum and Dad live apart, he’s an alcoholic, and the first girl I fall in love with is not only a vampire, she’s not even a girl!”