

feature article

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# Vampire in the Stockholm suburbs: *Let the Right One In* and genre hybridity

## ABSTRACT

*The article argues that one crucial factor in the success of the Swedish vampire film *Låt den rätte komma in/Let the Right One In* (Alfredson, 2008) is that it seamlessly merges several apparently disparate genres to create a hybrid form that appeals to widely divergent audiences. A detailed analysis of the film demonstrates how it simultaneously draws on and departs from common themes and motifs of indigenous Swedish film as well as vampire film tradition, combining elements of the horror film, the coming-of-age story and the realistic socio-psychological drama to create a unique mix of the innovative and the familiar. A comparison of critical responses in Sweden with those in the English-speaking world sheds further light on genre-specific expectations and ways the film transcends them.*

## KEYWORDS

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When John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Låt den rätte komma in/Let the Right One In* was published in 2004, he declared it to be the first Swedish vampire novel since Victor Rydberg's *Vampyren/'The Vampire'*, published in 1848 (Ordfront 2004). Though this claim may be hyperbole, the horror genre, as opposed to crime fiction, has hardly been a staple of recent Scandinavian popular literature.

*Let the Right One In* received almost universally positive reviews and was hugely popular with readers as well. Set in 1981–82 in the Stockholm suburb of Blackeberg where the author grew up, the novel is firmly anchored in that time and place and explores the mental landscapes of a wide range of characters. Primary focus, however, is on 12-year-old Oscar, who lacks meaningful contact with others both at home and at school, and his evolving friendship with new next-door neighbour Eli, whom he eventually realizes is a vampire.

The film *Låt den rätte komma in/Let the Right One In*, directed by Tomas Alfredson from Ajvide Lindqvist's own screenplay and premiering in October 2008, streamlines the novel considerably but retains its characteristic ambience. Like the source text, it was a hit both with critics and with audiences, winning numerous prizes at international film festivals and a total of five Guldbagge (Golden Bug) awards at Sweden's analogue to the Oscars. To date *Let the Right One In* has been sold to 54 countries; a Hollywood adaptation, *Let Me In*, directed by Matt Reeves, will be released in October 2010. Capitalizing on the international popularity of the Swedish film, the English translation of the novel has been published in a widely distributed paperback edition.

In Sweden, both novel and film versions of *Let the Right One In* attracted favourable attention in part because of the novelty of a Swedish vampire story. In the English-speaking world, vampire narratives, both literary and cinematic, have long been a staple of popular culture. What accounts, then, for the particular success of this film, not least in an international context? One crucial factor, this article argues, is that *Let the Right One In* seamlessly merges several apparently disparate genres to create a hybrid form that appeals to widely divergent audiences. A detailed analysis of the film demonstrates how it simultaneously draws on and departs from common themes and motifs of indigenous Swedish film as well as vampire film tradition, combining elements of the horror film, the coming-of-age story and the realistic socio-psychological drama to create a unique mix of the innovative and the familiar. A comparison of critical responses in Sweden with those in the English-speaking world sheds further light on genre-specific expectations and ways the film transcends them.

### **LET THE RIGHT ONE IN AND GENRE CONVENTIONS**

The dearth of vampires in Swedish popular literature is paralleled by their historical absence from Swedish film. Two other recent productions nevertheless suggest the beginning of a mini-trend.

The aptly titled *Frostbiten/Frostbitten/Frostbite* (Banke, 2006), set in the prolonged night of northern Sweden's winter, hearkens back to some of the conventions of much earlier vampire films, most obviously through the Bela Lugosi-like appearance of the main vampire figure. As in many classics of the genre, vampires in this film grow fangs when they prepare to attack, scale walls and walk on ceilings, and are repelled by crosses and by garlic. *Frostbitten* also incorporates stock motifs of other types of horror film. The primary vampire figure is a mad scientist, a doctor who initially searched for a cure for the vampire virus but later developed a pill that instead transforms human beings into vampires, whom he regards as a superior species that will take over the world. Like many cinematic monsters, he is able to change his appearance at will, towards the end of the film transmogrifying into a creature that is neither animal (such as the customary wolf or bat) nor vampire-like in accordance with the usual visual code. The film's lengthy prologue, set in the Ukraine toward the end of World War II, furthermore implies that he was a Nazi sympathizer.

As in various American productions since the 1980s, the film caters to the teen demographic by introducing character types familiar from another cinematic category, the high school film. In *Frostbitten*, the protagonist is the new girl in town; also featured are a bohemian kook and a party boy. In addition the film reveals occasional flashes of comedy, not all of them unintentional. The climax of the story is a bloody melee at an unchaperoned party gone wildly out of control when guests ingest stolen vampire pills, mistakenly believing them to be Ecstasy. The bohemian kook, now a vampire, meets her demise in an unusual fashion when the new girl in town impales her with a wooden garden gnome.

In contrast to *Frostbitten*, *Vampyrer/Not Like Others* (Pontikis, 2008) eliminates all specifics of vampire mythology except the essential one – killing humans to drink their blood. Vampire killings in the film are not, however, unmotivated acts of brutality; instead they occur in direct response to unwanted sexual attention or potential rape, thus underscoring their function as female revenge fantasy. The titular vampires, two sisters aged perhaps 18 and 20, are dependent on each other for survival in a dark, wintry Stockholm. Their core dilemma is older sister Vanja's desire to run off with her non-vampire boyfriend and assimilate into human society, leaving younger sister Vera, who is unrepentantly bloodthirsty and has poor impulse control, to fend for herself.

Throughout, vampirism functions primarily as a metaphor for exclusion, outsider status, or Otherness; in an interview, the director noted that he was inspired, not by vampire films, but by Marc Singer's documentary *Dark Days* (2000), about homeless men living in tunnels under New York City's Penn Station (Cederskog, 2008). In *Not Like Others*, the sisters' dark hair and eyes are associated more to a non-Swedish heritage than to the undead. Dialogue in the showdown between them, where Vera stresses the differences between 'us and them' and Vanja downplays the difficulties of adjusting to a new lifestyle, would be equally applicable to a proposed pairing across ethnic, religious or cultural boundaries, a parallel underscored by the film's English title. The upbeat ending, with Vanja meeting her boyfriend at the central station, ready to move on, is in keeping with the hopeful, pro-integration message of other youth-oriented Swedish films such as *Jalla! Jalla!* (Fares, 2000) and *Vingar av glas/Wings of Glass* (Bagher, 2000) that address the topic more directly (Wright 2005).

*Let the Right One In* reveals certain correspondences to the other Swedish vampire films, but also profound differences. Like *Not Like Others*, it uses the vampire motif to explore psychological isolation and exclusion from a wider social network, but in a more complex manner that establishes parallels between various kinds of alienation. Like *Frostbitten*, it makes reference to vampire lore while merging genre categories, but incorporates believable, nuanced characters rather than stereotypes familiar only from other films. More evocatively than either *Frostbitten* or *Not Like Others*, *Let the Right One In* exploits the long, dark Swedish winter to striking visual effect, creating a *mise-en-scène* dominated by black (dark sky, buildings and tree trunks), white (the snow), and various tones of grey. The sophisticated camerawork is matched by the subtle, evocative soundtrack; overall, the high production values establish a strong contrast to the cheesy make-up and dripping fangs of *Frostbitten* and countless other vampire films. Another significant divergence from the dominant trend of recent years is that *Let the Right One In* is not aimed particularly at teenagers, nor is it intended to appeal primarily to fans of the horror genre. Though the central characters are children, the psychological and

1. Much discussion of *Let the Right One In* on the Internet Movie Database takes vampire interest in and skill at puzzles as a given, but I have been unable to trace the source of this apparently arcane piece of vampire lore.
2. Here and elsewhere, English translations of the Swedish dialogue are my own.

interpersonal issues the film addresses are potentially relevant to audiences of all ages and varied cinematic tastes.

Like many contemporary vampire films, *Let the Right One In* retains some features of vampire mythology while dispensing with others. Though Eli displays superhuman strength and paranormal powers, cannot tolerate sunlight and sleeps during the day in a closed crate that resembles a coffin, there is no mention of crucifixes, mirrors or garlic. The setting is recognizably Blackeberg in the 1980s, to a Swedish audience both familiar and mundane. Rather than exploiting traditional Gothic elements, the film highlights two less common specifics of vampire lore, integrating them into the story in ways that illuminate the ramifications of outsider status and the evolution of the friendship between Oscar and Eli.

The first such detail is that vampires are fascinated by puzzles.<sup>1</sup> The initial tentative connection between Oscar and Eli comes about when he lends her his Rubik's cube and she demonstrates how to solve it. Morse code, which may be regarded as a puzzle of a different kind, facilitates communication through the wall separating their apartments. Towards the end of the film, Eli urges Oscar to touch a large, Fabergé-style egg that then shatters into thousands of tiny puzzle pieces, revealing a treasure trove of jewellery hidden within. The significance of the egg and its contents is opaque, but one plausible interpretation is that it represents the puzzle and enigma that is Eli, the protective shell around her private secrets, which she now willingly shares with him.

The second detail, that vampires must receive a verbal invitation to enter a dwelling, is alluded to in the film's title. When Oscar provokes Eli to step through a door without being bidden, she does so, causing her to bleed profusely from every pore and orifice. Eli thus demonstrates that she is, indeed, bound by this invisible barrier, that is, by her vampire nature. Simultaneously she reveals her trust in Oscar, who in turn comes to her aid by finally uttering the necessary words. The notion of letting the right one in also has a wider application, alluding to exclusion and how it may be overcome through shared understanding, by allowing another to be part of one's internal space. When Eli begins bleeding, Oscar embraces her and asks, 'What are you?' 'Just like you,' she replies.<sup>2</sup> When Oscar indignantly asserts that he does not kill people, Eli reminds him, 'But you'd like to if you could, to get revenge. I do it because I have to.' She then begs him, 'Be me a little.' Eli's appeal, in other words, is for empathy.

As it happens, Oscar and Eli have much in common. Oscar is failed by the adults in his life, who are too preoccupied to notice the cruel, incessant bullying he undergoes at school, let alone his unhealthy preoccupation with random acts of violence or his solitary enactment of revenge scenarios. He has no friends of his own age, in fact no friends at all. The motif of the bullied, isolated or 'different' child or adolescent, while atypical of the vampire genre, is a commonplace in recent Swedish film, examined from varying perspectives in works such as *Fucking Åmål/Show Me Love* (Moodysson, 1998), a lesbian coming-of-age/coming-out story; *Före stormen/Before the Storm* (Parsa, 2000), where seventh-grader Leo closely resembles Oscar and like him is bullied at school; *Gitarrmongot/The Guitar Mongoloid* (Östlund, 2004), in which the titular character has Down's syndrome; and *Ping-pongkingen/The King of Ping Pong* (Jonsson, 2008), which explores status and hierarchy among boys in their early teens. Since young people's problematic lives and circumstances are often the focus of media attention in Sweden, Oscar's situation seems very

familiar to the domestic audience.<sup>3</sup> This 'ordinariness', like the recognizable and realistically portrayed suburban setting, is in stark contrast to the vampire motif while concurrently making the paranormal segments of the narrative easier for viewers to take on face value. At the same time, similarities to critically praised films that focus on the difficulties of growing up suggest that *Let the Right One In* should not be relegated solely to a horror film ghetto.

Oscar is isolated, but Eli is cut off from human society in a more profound way.<sup>4</sup> Though she is not immediately identified as a vampire, her appearance and behaviour mark her as an outsider. Just as the sisters in *Not Like Others* are visually coded as 'immigrants', Eli is set apart from clean-cut, blonde Nordic types by her tousled, dark hair and unkempt, waif-like appearance. Her divergence is particularly striking because, with one exception, all other characters in the film are ethnic Swedes.

It is hardly unusual, of course, that vampire narratives suggest parallels between vampirism and outsider status. The Dracula figure in Bram Stoker's 1897 novel is a foreigner whose surreptitious arrival by ship to England has analogies to illegal immigration. As played by Lugosi in Tod Browning's classic film *Dracula* (1931), he is identified as Other in a variety of ways, including physiognomy, attire, haunted castle-like residence and pronounced foreign accent. With minor variations, these elements are retained in cinematic renditions for several decades. In classic vampire films, however, this outsider figure is invariably menacing, a manifestation of the audience's deepest fears, whereas in more recent productions, including *Not Like Others* and *Let the Right One In*, the vampire's alienation, exclusion and difference may elicit a degree of compassion and understanding.

In the context of Swedish cinematic tradition, the visual association of vampires with dark-haired immigrants does not demonize the latter. Instead it reinforces a sympathetic view of the vampire figures by calling to mind numerous films of the last several decades that portray 'new Swedes' and second-generation immigrants with sensitivity and insight, focusing on the difficulties of adjusting to a foreign culture or negotiating between conflicting cultural norms (Wright 1998: 248–322). Ethnicities represented in earlier films range from Greeks in the documentary-style *Jag heter Stelios/Foreigners* (Bergenstråhle, 1972), an Argentinean in the melancholy cross-cultural love story *Frihetens murar/The Walls of Freedom* (Ahrne, 1978) and Italian 'guest workers' in the wistful comedy *Ett paradis utan biljard/A Paradise without Billiards* (Barsotti, 1991), to families with roots in the Middle East in more recent films such as *Jalla! Jalla!*, *Wings of Glass* and *Hus i helvetet/All Hell Let Loose* (Taslimi, 2002). Parallels to Eli's situation are not direct, but she faces some of the same restrictions and obstacles in her developing friendship with Oscar and her dealings with mainstream society – that is, with the living. Films that concentrate on the experience of immigrant children – *Seppan* (Fagerström-Olsson, 1986), which examines social standing, harassment and exclusion in a multicultural microcosm, and *Zozo* (Fares, 2005), where the 11-year-old protagonist loses his family in Lebanon's civil war only to be abused and mocked by classmates in Sweden – reveal a deeper similarity to Eli's (and Oscar's) alienation, suggesting by analogy that her plea for empathy is directed not only to Oscar but to the viewer.

Despite parallels to the customary visual shorthand for 'immigrant', Eli is more closely associated with a related, but older cinematic stereotype less familiar to contemporary audiences, the gypsy or *tattare* ('traveller') figure. In Swedish films of the 1940s and 1950s, the two groups were conflated and

3. Though the narrative focuses on the two children, most of the film's adult characters likewise are outsiders or lack meaningful contact with others. Oscar's mother seems distracted and spends her time at home watching TV; his father is an alcoholic who chooses the company of a buddy and a bottle rather than his son. Håkan's involvement with Eli places him completely outside society's norms. The group of misfits that includes Jocke, Lacke and Virginia have each other and a place to hang out, but little else.
4. Perhaps equally importantly, Eli also appears to be entirely disconnected from her own kind. Unlike the book, the film provides no explanation of how Eli was 'turned', no indication that vampires may associate with each other.

5. Interestingly, no Swedish critics noted parallels to gypsy or traveller figures, but one American reviewer (Covert 2008) calls Eli 'Gypsy-ish.'
6. Examples include *Gud fader och tattaren*/'God and the Gypsy' (Faustman, 1954), *Simon Syndaren/Simon the Sinner* (Hellström, 1954), and *Synnöve Solbakken/A Girl of Solbakken* (Hellström, 1957).
7. The film does not explain why Håkan has undertaken to 'help' Eli by killing strangers and draining victims of their blood, though his overly possessive reaction to her friendship with Oscar and hand-dog passivity when she castigates him suggest something unsettling about the relationship. In the novel, he is revealed to be a paedophile driven by twisted love.
8. One could argue that the two young henchmen who repeatedly hesitate when pressed to engage in acts of violence do not 'deserve' to die. Furthermore, an earlier scene revealed that Conny, Oscar's chief tormentor, himself is bullied by his older brother, thus suggesting a reason (if not a justification) for his behaviour. In the swimming pool scene, Conny recognizes that his brother is going too far but is powerless to stop him. Only Eli's paranormal powers can save Oscar, and she does not distinguish degrees of guilt among the perpetrators.

commonly portrayed as itinerant social outcasts, living in unconventional family constellations and prone to violence (Wright 1998: 95–147), a description that applies to Eli as well. She resides with Håkan, a middle-aged man who is not her father, and is forced to move from place to place. She does not attend school or even know her date of birth, though she tells Oscar she has been 12 years old for a very long time. That she goes outdoors in the dead of winter in short sleeves, and sometimes barefoot, can be explained by her inability, as a vampire, to experience pain or cold, but her appearance nevertheless suggests dire poverty and neglect, as the worried reaction of the hospital receptionist demonstrates. Visually, this image is linked in the popular imagination with the gypsy urchin. In keeping with another side of the gypsy stereotype, Eli has also squirreled away money and jewellery, presumably acquired by nefarious means. Like cinematic gypsies, she is frequently coupled with stealth, on several occasions seemingly appearing out of nowhere, and with violence.<sup>5</sup>

Yet despite her acts of brutality, Eli is not an unsympathetic character, largely because, like Oscar, she is isolated and vulnerable. A parallel may be found in several revisionist films of the mid-1950s in which traveller/gypsy characters are not vilified, but rather seen as victims of social stigmatization and psychological rejection.<sup>6</sup> Eli's behaviour, moreover, is mitigated by the fact that she attempts to follow an ethical code; when she assures Oscar that she will never harm him, she means what she says. In contrast to the vampire figures of innumerable earlier films, Eli derives no pleasure from luring, attacking and killing human victims, preferring to let Håkan do the slaughtering for her – a choice that may not be morally superior but is nevertheless a measure of her reluctance. Initially she kills only when desperately thirsty, after Håkan fails to bring her the blood she subsists on. Afterward, as she leans forward over the limp body of Jocke, her posture conveys pain, regret and remorse.<sup>7</sup> Only the final revenge killings, when Eli comes to Oscar's assistance, are deliberately ill-intended and thus more in keeping with the usual genre expectations. Even so, since she rescues Oscar from mutilation or death and the characters who die are unsympathetic, the film reverses the accustomed horror film pattern of audience identification with the victims.<sup>8</sup>

Tellingly, when Oscar finally asks Eli if she is a vampire, she responds obliquely with: 'I live on blood.' Vampirism in the film version of *Let the Right One In* is loosely equated with a dreadful illness that must be endured at great emotional and physical cost. In this inverse form of haemophilia, Eli needs regular 'transfusions' to survive. Though the association of vampirism with disease can be traced back to the original Dracula story and many of its early cinematic redactions, a closer parallel here is to the premise in *Frostbitten* that it is caused by a highly contagious virus. Through Virginia, who survives an attack but becomes infected from the vampire bite, the film illustrates why Eli is forced to kill her victims after feeding on them: death is ultimately more merciful than condemning them to existence as a vampire.

The sexual overtones of many vampire stories, including recent ones, in which the vampire bite serves as a stand-in or metaphor for penetration, undergo a radical shift in *Let the Right One In*. The two protagonists are 12 years old. Their appearance identifies them as prepubescent. Their budding affection encompasses physical closeness but is emphatically not sexual. Gender norms and gender identity nevertheless play a role in the narrative, since both Oscar and Eli evince androgynous characteristics, yet another mark of their divergence from a perceived paradigm of 'normality'. Oscar has pasty skin, wispy blond hair, and delicate features. His voice is soft and relatively high

pitched. His awkward, slightly pigeon-toed gait and downward gaze convey a lack of confidence. Since he is physically weak, he initially submits to bullying without a trace of open resistance. Not only is Oscar at a pre-sexual stage of development, in many ways his presentation is the opposite of a commonly accepted, socially constructed ideal of masculinity.

Eli likewise deviates significantly from gender expectations. She seems to care little about her appearance or apparel. Her voice is intense and low pitched – to highlight these qualities, the voice of actress Lina Leandersson was dubbed. From her first encounter with Oscar, Eli behaves in a conventionally ‘masculine’ manner by taking the initiative, setting the parameters, encouraging him to fight back against his tormentors and assuring him she will help him if needed.

Eli’s gender identity, moreover, is more ambiguous than it initially appears. When Oscar first hugs her, she enquires, ‘If I hadn’t been a girl, would you have liked me anyway?’ Later, when Oscar asks if she wants to go steady, she responds, ‘Oscar, I’m not a girl.’ Rather than following up on this revelation, Oscar merely repeats, ‘Well, do you want to go steady or not?’ Though initially reluctant, Eli agrees upon being reassured that nothing between them will change.

On one level, this exchange illustrates what ‘going steady’ means to 12-year-olds: it is an affirmation of friendship and loyalty quite disconnected from overt sexuality. Though Oscar and Eli are lying in bed together – she has taken refuge with him after a feeding and has shed her blood-soaked clothes – the child-like quality of the encounter is reinforced when Eli begins playing a children’s guessing game called Bulleribock. Oscar’s subsequent proposal that he and Eli cement their bond by mixing blood could be construed as a stand-in for the merging of other bodily fluids – that is, for sex – but the symbolic gesture itself is generally associated with vows of undying friendship between pre-adolescent boys, and consequently seems instead to be another indication that he does not yet distinguish between different types of friendship. Still, Eli’s repeated insistence that she is not a girl creates a degree of uncertainty. Viewers who have not read the book may interpret her disclosure to mean that she is not, in fact, an ordinary human child but, as we – though not Oscar – already know, a vampire.

In a later scene, when Eli changes clothes in the next room, Oscar catches an almost subliminal glimpse of a genital scar. Since the POV shot is so brief, it remains ambiguous. A first-time viewer of the film is unlikely to distinguish anatomical details<sup>9</sup> and may not attribute any particular significance to the scar, or might construe it as suggesting the decay or disintegration of the vampire body, like her faintly unpleasant odour. Oscar asks no questions and Eli offers no explanation, and consequently the film does not conclusively address the question of her biological sex.<sup>10</sup> Most spectators are likely to construe the film’s vampire figure, androgynous qualities notwithstanding, as a girl, not least because the actress Lina Leandersson is (and ‘feels’) female.

Though viewers may speculate about the matter, whether or not Eli has a Y chromosome is not a significant issue within the film narrative, since Oscar apparently accepts uncertainty in this regard, just as he accepts the fact that Eli must drink blood to survive. The connection between them, based on shared outsider status, is more important than the specifics of Eli’s Otherness. The film’s final shot, a sort of epilogue, conclusively establishes the children’s solidarity in response to the disappointments and dangers of the outside world: Oscar, in a train compartment, taps out the word *puss* (‘little kiss’) in Morse to Eli in her sleeping crate. He has joined her in the flight from Blackeberg.

9. A freeze frame reveals that Eli lacks a vaginal slit and that the scar is where a penis would be; in other words, the vampire is technically a castrated male.
10. The novel makes it explicit that Eli is biologically male. Centuries earlier, he was mutilated as part of a sadistic ritual that turned him into a vampire, and has since lived as a girl. This backstory calls to mind a commonplace of many earlier vampire narratives, the association of the vampire bite with sexual ravishment, or more generally with forbidden or twisted sexuality, a connection that is entirely absent from the film. There is, however, an additional clue to Eli’s biological sex if we interpret the title as alluding to the vampire child, since grammatically, the word *rätte* – ‘right one’ – can refer only to a male.

Though emotionally satisfying, the ending also raises troubling questions. In the usual resolution of the coming-of-age story, adverse experiences push the protagonist towards psychological maturity and social integration. In *Let the Right One In* the adult world is rejected entirely, as Oscar and Eli instead turn only towards each other – though Eli, of course, has no choice. But leaving aside the improbability of two children getting by on their own even if one of them has paranormal powers, what will happen as Oscar grows older and Eli does not? Will he, too, remain frozen in a pre-sexual state of development? Will his conscience begin to burden him? If not, will he become another Håkan?

Reservations and questions notwithstanding, it is a mistake, I believe, to distil *Let the Right One In* to a simplistic message about the risk of neglected children becoming amoral or violent. Neither does the film, in the manner of *Not Like Others*, utilize familiar features of the vampire tale primarily to illustrate a common revenge fantasy. Since the emotional focus of the film is on the bond between Oscar and Eli, the core message is in fact optimistic. By exploring various manifestations of the Other, the narrative demonstrates that outsider status can be counteracted through empathy and mutual support, a theme that is hardly typical of vampire films but resonates across genre boundaries and audience groups.

Though the thematic weight falls on psychological and interpersonal issues, *Let the Right One In* does feature several spectacularly violent vampire-related deaths, most obviously the spontaneous immolation of Virginia and the bloody dismemberments at the swimming pool. Interestingly, the director and scriptwriter stress the dramaturgic significance of these more conventionally genre-specific scenes. On the commentary track of the Swedish DVD of the film, Alfredson and Ajvide Lindqvist mention that some viewers felt the story should have ended with the scene where Oscar watches through the window as Eli departs in a taxi, a shot that parallels her arrival in the opening sequence. In contrast, the director and scriptwriter themselves consider the next scene, the swimming-pool massacre, to be the logical denouement, the climax towards which the entire film narrative logically builds. Even so, the blood and gore in this sequence was not an end in itself. In an interview, Alfredson comments that the minimal budget for special effects made it necessary to emphasize other matters – to the film's ultimate benefit, since it is precisely the mixture of social realism and the fantastic that he finds innovative (Bjurwald 2008: 51).

The arresting hybridity of *Let the Right One In* is thus a conscious goal of the film-makers, deriving in large measure from the source text but also manifested in particularly cinematic ways. As an unapologetic vampire tale, the film incorporates various commonplaces of the genre, using paranormal elements both to offset the mundane setting by introducing suspense and to shed light on the relationship between Oscar and Eli. The atypical qualities of the vampire Eli and the unconventional storyline counteract any tendency towards cliché. Because she is both a child and a reluctant predator, because she is isolated and must fend for herself, Eli elicits pity as well as fear. Her visual association with established outsider groups – immigrants and gypsies – further 'humanizes' her and may suggest that she, like them, faces painful rejection and exclusion. Moreover, the film establishes numerous parallels between Eli and Oscar. By focusing on their evolving bond rather than on vampire attacks per se, the narrative connects *Let the Right One In* less with the horror tradition than with a range of films, including many Swedish ones, that are



child-centred but not produced explicitly for children. Though the film touches on gender issues and gender ambiguity, this child-oriented perspective sidesteps the overtly sexual implications of many vampire tales, both classic films and contemporary ones aimed at the teenage audience. Instead, the two young protagonists' progression from loneliness and alienation to friendship, mutual support and empowerment functions as a gripping emotional journey with widespread appeal.

## THE FILM'S RECEPTION

An examination of critical response to *Let the Right One In* in Sweden as compared to the United States and the United Kingdom may help cast light on genre taxonomy and the film's appeal to various audiences. When considering Swedish reactions to both the novel and film, it should be kept in mind that a historical dearth of indigenous vampire narratives by no means meant that Swedes were unfamiliar with vampire lore or with its recent incarnations and permutations in the United States and elsewhere. The current groundswell of interest in vampires may be traced back to the American television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which achieved cult status in the United States during its seven seasons (1997–2003) and was shown on Swedish television in 2000–06. *Buffy*, and its spin-offs, has become a fascinating cultural phenomenon, both because it created an entire cosmology of the supernatural in which vampires play a central role and because it has attracted new audiences to the genre, in particular younger female viewers.

Though vampire novels may not occupy the central position in the Swedish youth market that they hold in the United States, the genre is clearly gaining in popularity. Swedish television has responded to the post-*Buffy* vampire wave as well. Two series premiered in the summer of 2008, the British comedy *Young Dracula*, about a family of Transylvanian vampires who settle in a small English town, and the American drama *Moonlight*, featuring yet another teenage vampire. Just a few days after *Let the Right One In* opened in movie theatres, the American series *True Blood* was introduced, with Swedish actor Alexander Skarsgård as a vampire of Viking heritage.

Swedish reviewers and audiences were thus in a position to consider *Let the Right One In* within two quite separate contextual frameworks: the international horror genre and its recent evolution in American and British popular media; and indigenous film production. Among Swedish-language print reviewers, however, the only one to really do so was Maaret Koskinen (2008), who problematizes issues of genre and discusses what vampires have represented in various earlier films. Other commentators made relatively few specific comparisons of any kind, merely noting adherences to and deviations from the general expectations and conventions of the vampire tale. The hybrid qualities of the work under consideration, the fusion of plausible realism and elements of the supernatural, generally drew praise, though occasionally expectations seem startlingly conventional: one reviewer finds it difficult to accept a vampire film in which not a single fang is bared (Engström 2008). Another notes that the unrelenting darkness in *Let the Right One In* is reminiscent of British Hammer horror films (Andersson 2008), but does not pursue the analogy. Similarly, the intriguing suggestion that Eli's existence could be interpreted as a product of Oscar's imagination (Stenberg 2008) does not elicit parallels to other films where reality and fantasy blur in the eyes and mind of a child. There is only passing reference to the Swedish vampire films *Frostbitten* and *Not Like Others* (Gentele 2008).

11. In Sweden, *Twilight* premiered a week later than *Let the Right One In*, so Swedish reviews of the latter film do not compare them. Swedish reviews of *Twilight*, however, often compare it unfavourably with *Let the Right One In*.

Comparisons are instead to Ajvide Lindqvist's novel. Most reviewers consider the film's paring down of the plot to be both effective and necessary, but opinions differ with regard to cinematic ambiguity about matters such as Eli's sexual identity and her relationship to Håkan. Though several critics would prefer clarification, others assert that suggestion is preferable to spelling things out. The most detailed consideration of differences between novel and film points out that the book's frequent shifts in focalization allow readers to enter into the emotional lives of many different characters and finds the objective, more distanced point of view of the film less compelling (Engström 2008). Comments like these suggest that some Swedish reviewers had difficulty separating the film from the source text and responding to it as an independent creation.

Reviewers from the United States and the United Kingdom are more likely than their Swedish counterparts to contextualize *Let the Right One In* by comparing it with other films in the vampire genre, whether classics or contemporaneous films such as *Twilight*. Chicago-based Roger Ebert notes, for instance, that the film 'takes vampires as seriously as the versions of *Nosferatu* by Murnau and Herzog, and that is very seriously indeed' (Ebert 2008). In comparisons with *Twilight*, *Let the Right One In* always comes out ahead: '[I]t's everything *Twilight* wanted to be but wasn't: beautiful to gaze at, achingly romantic, emotionally involving, unexpectedly terrifying' (Sragow 2008). Just as emphatically, English critic Kim Newman, who has published widely on the horror film and also writes horror fiction, asserts that while *Twilight* may be the most profitable vampire movie ever made, the Swedish film 'trumps the Hollywood vision by landing an instant, secure place on the list of the ten best vampire movies' (Newman 2008).<sup>11</sup> Critical coolness towards more conventional Hollywood productions extends to the projected remake of *Let the Right One In*. Every reviewer who weighs in on the matter considers this a very bad idea; one predicts that the American adaptation will be 'something like an all-harmonica version of Beethoven's Ninth' (Anderson 2009).

American and British reviewers also compare *Let the Right One In* with films that fall outside the vampire category, in particular with *El laberinto del fauno/Pan's Labyrinth* (del Toro, 2006). In this context, too, assessments are generally flattering and favourable, as in 'This eerie tale can stand alongside *Pan's Labyrinth* or *The Orphanage* for the way it manages to invest seemingly familiar material with a strikingly original sensibility' (Hunter 2009). Similarly, in the opinion of another reviewer, '*Let The Right One In* can stand toe-to-toe with *Spirit Of The Beehive*, *Pan's Labyrinth* or *Orpheus*' (Newman 2008). The Swedish film also, one reviewer notes, 'shares with *Stand by Me* an appreciation of the 12-year-old state of mind' (Anderson 2008). By noting similarities to highly acclaimed contemporary films and modern classics, whether foreign or domestic, critics underscore that *Let the Right One In* transcends the horror genre, instead positioning it as a quality film in an art-house context.

English-language reviewers, and non-Swedish spectators in general, are unlikely to have more than a glancing familiarity with Swedish film tradition, but critics, cineastes and some older viewers know the films of Ingmar Bergman. Roger Ebert, in fact, points out a parallel between the evocative opening shot of Oscar looking out his apartment window and the beginning of Bergman's *Tystnaden/The Silence* (1963), where another isolated and emotionally abandoned boy stares out the window of a train (Ebert 2008). Less precisely, another reviewer calls *Let the Right One In* 'Swedish, winter-lit, Bergmanesque' (Edelstein 2008). The comment that Oscar and Eli 'both look

like they just emerged from a Scandinavian ice-water plunge of moroseness' (Covert 2008) may be a more oblique allusion to Bergman, or may simply reflect a common assumption about the Nordic temperament. Since Bergman is widely venerated as one of the all-time masters of auteur cinema, critical comparisons and references to his oeuvre elevate the status of *Let the Right One In*, serving as a further measure of the film's visual impact, seriousness of purpose and relevance for art-house audiences.

With only a few exceptions, English-language reviewers merely mention that Ajvide Lindqvist adapted his own novel for the screen without comparing the two versions. The overall propensity for examining the film on its own merits, separate from the source material, may be one reason why English-language reviewers are more likely to situate it within various cinematic traditions and compare it to specific contemporary films, and more generally to examine it with fresh eyes. Their observations are sometimes strikingly on target. Oscar lives, according to one critic, in a housing complex with 'the kind of anonymous architecture that has a living-dead look of its own' (Sragow 2008). In a turn of phrase that effectively captures the atmosphere of the film, the same reviewer speculates that the suburb 'has been deteriorating because of a lack of history or heart from the first days of its creation'.

Comments like these suggest that English-language reviewers tend to respond differently than Swedish ones to the Swedish suburban setting. In a domestic context, the vampire motif is strikingly uncommon while the locale is familiar and easily identified, which underscores the elements of social realism in the narrative. Many of the film's character types also seem ordinary and recognizable, whether from cinematic tradition, the source text, personal exposure or some combination of the above. Critics in the English-speaking world, deluged by native vampire narratives, instead construe the Swedish environment as exotic and out of the ordinary, which in turn reinforces the innovative aspects of the story itself.

In general, Swedish reviewers, though appreciative and frequently enthusiastic about *Let the Right One In*, are somewhat more reluctant than English-language critics to praise it without qualification. The reasons for this caution are complex. The film was first screened in January 2008 at the Göteborg International Film Festival, where it won the prize as best Nordic film, and it went on to win awards at several other international film festivals before the official Swedish premiere. Expectations were high when it was finally released for wider distribution in late October 2008. One reviewer explicitly refuses to fall into the expected trance, concluding that *Let the Right One In* appeals primarily to the already bitten, that is, to genre fans (Eklund 2008). Others may also have felt that the film was overly publicized or hyped in advance and resisted, consciously or unconsciously, joining the chorus of rapturous praise.

Most Swedish reviewers had no difficulty seeing *Let the Right One In* both as a genre piece and as a coming-of-age story or a study of isolation and alienation, but it seems probable that some of them were reluctant to proclaim a vampire film to be a masterpiece. In this context it is suggestive that, despite international accolades and five Swedish Guldbagge awards – for direction, script, cinematography, sound and production design – the film did not win the award for best picture, which instead went to Jan Troell's historical/ biographical drama *Maria Larssons eviga ögonblick/ Everlasting Moments* (2008), a luminous and psychologically compelling but more conventional work. Similarly, the Swedish Film Institute chose the Troell film rather than *Let the Right One In* as Sweden's submission for the US Academy award for best foreign film.

English-language reviewers did not share these reservations, with a sizeable number giving *Let the Right One In* a top rating in verbal commentary and awarding it the maximum number of stars. Superlatives abound. Some endorsements, though unqualified, are genre-specific, proclaiming that it is 'one of the great horror films of recent years' (Williams 2008) or 'can only become a classic of the genre' (Hunter 2009). Others stress its hybrid qualities: '*Let the Right One In* is one of the essential horror films of the decade. It's also one of the most enthralling romances and one of the best films about children' (Covert 2008). Similarly, the film is both 'a devastating, curiously uplifting inhuman drama and a superbly crafted genre exercise' (Newman 2008). Some reviewers forcefully urge viewers to look beyond genre categories:

[The film] is, in the basest of terms, a horror flick. But it's also a spectacularly moving and elegant movie, and to dismiss it into genre-hood – to mentally stuff it into the horror pigeonhole – is to overlook what is at this point the best film of the year.

(Anderson 2008)

Still others ignore genre classification altogether when passing judgement, pronouncing *Let the Right One In* to be 'spectacularly assured, mournfully beautiful' and 'one of the real finds of 2008' (Phillips 2008); 'one of the year's true originals' (Jenkins 2009); or quite simply 'a magnificent film' (Knox 2008). One review concludes, 'It deserves to be called great' (Covert 2008).

It is possible that whatever the subject matter, English-language reviewers are simply more inclined to make bold pronouncements than are their Swedish counterparts. Still, as a group, American and British commentators seem more willing to look beyond genre classifications and embrace the film's hybridity as inventive and enriching. This tendency is also apparent in a number of the international awards *Let the Right One In* has received. Citing the film's 'mesmerizing exploration of loneliness and alienation through masterful reexamination of the vampire myth', the jury at the prestigious Tribeca Film Festival gave it the top honour, the Founders Award for Best Narrative Feature (Nichols 2008). Most awards, like this one, are not genre-specific; the most frequent designations are 'best foreign film' or 'best foreign-language film'. The British Film Institute's organ *Sight and Sound* moved even beyond that category, placing *Let the Right One In* fifth on its list of the year's ten best films (Anon 2010b). Even more sweepingly, it was ranked fifteenth in the British film magazine *Empire's* list of 'The 100 Best Films of World Cinema', defined as 'the greatest films not in the English language' (Anon 2010c).

Though hardly a megahit, *Let the Right One In* played quite well in both the United States and the United Kingdom, given that it was a subtitled foreign-language film by an unknown director and without familiar actors. In the United States, the distribution company Magnolia Pictures marketed it primarily as a horror film, anticipating an audience of 'arthouse enthusiasts and genre aficionados' (Block 2010). A representative noted, however, that the *Twilight*-inspired vampire renaissance enabled *Let the Right One In* to 'hitch a ride into the national spotlight' and reach a much wider audience than expected'. The film played on a total of 53 screens nationwide, primarily in art-house venues, with the length of the runs ranging from twenty weeks in New York City to single play dates at film societies. Based on a total gross of \$2,122,065, Magnolia estimates the overall number of spectators as 282,942 (Block 2010).

In the United Kingdom, the distributor Momentum Pictures promoted *Let the Right One In* principally as ‘great drama, [its] foreign nationality incidental’ (Anon 2010a: 33). British spectators totalled 201,579 – a sizeable segment of the European market – compared, for instance, to France and Germany, with 35,152 and 39,800 respectively (Lumiere Database 2010). The United States and the United Kingdom were thus by a wide margin the two countries most responsible for the film’s international popularity. It would seem that the concurrent wave of English-language vampire narratives, coupled with rave reviews in numerous publications and well-publicized awards, opened the way for the Swedish film to become a crossover success.

In Sweden, *Let the Right One In* did well but not spectacularly at the box office. It had a relatively long run, continuing to play in movie theatres well into 2009, bringing the total number of viewers to 151,888 (Lumiere Database 2010). This figure is quite high if the film is regarded as an art-house release or a serious drama, but fairly modest if it is seen as a genre piece.

Favourable word-of-mouth – including social media – and commentary on Internet forums no doubt also played a role in promoting *Let the Right One In*. Debate on IMDb.com has been particularly extensive and lively, chiefly among vampire film fans. Though discussion sometimes focuses on esoteric aspects of vampire lore or the precise nature of Eli’s scar – and perhaps predictably, an occasional viewer, learning that the novel establishes Eli as biologically male, reacts with retroactive repugnance to the scene where the two children share a bed – few commentators object to the film’s emphasis on characters and relationships rather than fangs and fright. Quite the contrary; despite its lack of conformity to certain genre expectations, genre devotees who have, so to speak, cut their teeth on recent vampire films usually rank *Let the Right One In* very highly, in some instances even proclaiming it to be the best vampire film ever.

Despite certain differences between Sweden and the English-speaking world, critical and audience response to *Let the Right One In* illustrates the strong appeal of genre hybridity. Though IMDb.com always casts a wide net when designating genre, the label it provides – Drama/Fantasy/Horror/Mystery/Romance – may serve as an illustration of the prevailing reluctance to pigeonhole the film. This plurality may be seen in the context of recent developments in vampire film tradition – a predominant shift from Gothic trappings to everyday environments and elements of comedy and/or romance – but one should also recall that genre labels have always been mutable, subject to redefinition and reinterpretation, and that genre mixing is not a new development (Altman 1999: 123–43). Reference to genre, in particular by critics, nevertheless persists as a useful shorthand. As a marketing strategy to increase the likelihood of attracting a diverse audience, there are obvious advantages to multiple genre labels.

Skilful marketing alone does not, however, account for the success of *Let the Right One In*. Strikingly favourable reviews, multiple awards and laudatory word-of-mouth have all played a significant part. I would nevertheless argue that the most important factor is the film’s innovative fusion of genres. Employing particular aspects of vampire mythology to elucidate an evolving friendship, *Let the Right One In* merges social and psychological realism with the supernatural. Though the film draws on numerous cinematic conventions, it also expands on and moves beyond them, offering an unusual interpretation of the vampire figure and an unanticipated twist on the ways young people negotiate their interpersonal and social roles.

Because *Let the Right One In* is both an unequivocal vampire tale and a moving, elegantly crafted story of alienation and connection, it can gratify, in equal measure, fans of the vampire genre and a wide audience beyond the horror niche.

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