



Subjects of the Visual Arts: Vampires

by Michael G. Cornelius

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Max Schreck as Count Orlok in a promotional photograph for F. W. Murnau's film *Nosferatu*.

An invention of the nineteenth-century, the artistic vampire, as opposed to the vampire of folklore, is connected not with disease but with sexuality. For authors, artists, and filmmakers, artistic vampires represent a common sexualized metaphor--the release of insurgent passion and emotion--that includes such details as the erotic foreplay of vampires' attacks and the creatures' dependency on the bodily fluid of their victims.

From its inception, as an outsider within polite society, the artistic vampire has been consistently linked with homosexuality. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Christabel" (1797) portended a lesbian vampire, while John Polidori's "The Vampyre" (1819) depicted a young man's homosocial desire for the dominant male vampire.

While this association pervaded much of the Victorian era, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the sexual vampire gave way to a more horrific image, and the first vampire films, F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1919) and Tod Browning's *London After Midnight* (1925), reflect this trend. Early vampire cinema is remarkably heterosexist, belying the literary tradition that spawned it.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s, coupled with the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and a new public awareness of homosexuality, soon altered things, and gay and lesbian themes became commonplace in vampire cinema.

The first important homosexual vampire film was Roy Ward Baker's *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), an adaptation of J. Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla." Other gay vampires appeared simultaneously in Roman Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967), Lancer Brooks' *Sons of Satan* (1973), Ulli Lommel's *Tenderness of Wolves* (1973), and Jimmy Sangster's *Lust for a Vampire* (1973).

This marriage of metaphor--vampire to homosexual--remained a constant throughout the 1970s, culminating in Tony Scott's *The Hunger* (1983).

Now permanently linked with sexuality in such films as Neil Jordan's *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction* (1995), Michael Almereyda's *Nadja* (1995), and David DeCocteau's *The Brotherhood* (2000), homosexuality remains a common if not constant theme, a sexual metaphor that continues to bind representations of vampires with homosexuals in the arts.

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