The Role of Nosferatu in the Development of Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Androgyny in Vampire Film

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Abstract

F.W. Murnau’s Nosferatu has long been hailed as a classic horror film, serving as an inspiration for the vampire films that followed. Yet, the film is more than a simple vampire story; debates have raged for years over the sexual undertones and the subtle twisting of traditional gender roles in the film. This is especially true of Count Orlok, the film’s titular Nosferatu. While some scholars place Orlok in a strict gender dichotomy, I will argue that Murnau’s vampire transcends the sexuality and gender binaries and is inherently androgynous and nonheterosexual. In fact, Nosferatu could well serve as a reflection of the gender nonconformity that was becoming common in 1920s Germany. The film itself provides many symbols that allude to gender nonconformity, which is also evidenced by the actions of the vampire. These twists in gender and sexuality have been the film’s biggest contribution to vampire film, with many contemporary vampires keeping similar traits.

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Introduction

Enigmatic, seductive, and bloodthirsty, the vampire is one of the most enduring creatures in the human consciousness, and nowhere is this more apparent than in film. Indeed, film seems to be intimately linked to the vampire, as many early films told vampire stories. Though not the first vampire film, F.W. Murnau’s Nosferatu is one of the most intriguing, as it had a long-lasting impact on how gender and sexuality were presented in the vampire films that followed. Although Bram Stoker’s Dracula is often credited with creating the modern vampire, it is more often influences of Murnau’s vampire that appear throughout contemporary vampire film. Murnau’s vampire, while on the surface presented as the heterosexual male Count Orlok, clearly demonstrates through his appearance and behavior an identity that is neither entirely male nor entirely heterosexual. Although modern film vampires usually bear almost no physical resemblance to Murnau’s vampire, they do often reflect Count Orlok’s ambiguous sexuality and his androgynous gender. Using the predecessors of Nosferatu, the film and its surrounding culture, I will demonstrate that Murnau’s vampire exhibits an ambiguous, nonbinary sexuality and an androgynous gender identity. I will examine the traits of sexuality and gender exhibited by both the vampires of folklore and literary vampires prior to Nosferatu’s release. I will
then examine the ways in which these traits are presented in Murnau’s film through its characters, symbols, and the influences of the surrounding Weimar culture. Using the vampire films that followed Nosferatu, I aim to represent the wealth of vampire films, dating from 1931 to 2010, analyzing the representations of gender identity, sexuality, and androgyny within the films’ vampire characters. This analysis will provide evidence that the current trend of sexually ambiguous and androgynous vampires links directly back to Murnau’s 1922 film.

Literary & Folkloric Background

To understand how sexuality and gender are portrayed in Nosferatu, it is important to first examine the materials that would influence Murnau’s film. Murnau’s vampire, though Dracula is often cited as the primary influence, is based upon many different sources, including traditional folklore and literary fiction. Murnau’s vampire, rather than being based on a particular type, is an amalgam, showing traits of both literary and folkloric vampires, although the literary models have been the more influential ones, as the fictional vampire tends to be tall, thin, and sallow, the folkloric vampire is plump and ruddy, or dark in color…. The two would be unlikely to meet socially, for the fictional vampire tends to spring from nobility and to live in a castle, while the folkloric vampire is of peasant stock and resides (during the day at least) in the graveyard in which he was buried. (Barber 4)

However, Murnau’s vampire does share one thing with the vampire of folklore, and that is a sexual component. Indeed, Erin Collopy notes that “[o]ne big thing that seems to follow throughout (history) is there’s a strong erotic element that’s associated with the vampire…” (Musico n.p.) and indeed, when it comes to male vampires in folklore, “[s]ometimes his subordinates are all women, and his attacks usually have a pronounced sexual component: he is magnetic, irresistible, and deliberate… as though he knows that the lady really wants it this way” (Barber 83).

Yet, the vampire of folklore is not always male. The life of Countess Elizabeth Báthory de Ecsed of Hungary, who tortured and murdered several young girls in her charge, presents one of the most illustrious cases of vampire folklore. Later reports would claim that Báthory would bathe in or drink the blood of her victims in order to stay young. While Báthory’s true motives have never come to light, it is possible that there was a sexual component to the murders that was also incorporated into local legend. Thus, the earlier vampire legends create vampires that are not strictly heterosexual, but may be homosexual as well, a trait that would emerge in literature and later be cemented in film by Nosferatu. Other female vampires can be found in the legends of the true undead as well; e.g., Philip Rohr notes in his 1679 treatise De Masticatione Mortuorum that, when examining cases of noises coming from graves, “although both the corpses of men are known to have grunted, gibbered, and squeaked… it is more of-
ten the bodies of the weaker sex who have thus uttered curious voices” (Summers 184). These vampires of folklore would endure a transformation as they entered literature. Most notable is the switch in the vampire legend’s emphasis from gaining life force through the blood of others to being adorned with more erotic aspects.

The portrayal of the vampire as a sexual being has been present since the beginning of the vampire legend, but it is in European literature where the vampire’s sexual ambiguity and androgyny is first widely spread. Indeed, it appears that Murnau’s vampire owes much more to these literary concepts, which stray outside of sexual and gender norms, than to the vampire representations in traditional folklore. Literary vampires that would challenge the gender and sexuality binary would appear throughout the nineteenth century, though Murnau’s film would be the first vampire film to make particular use of them, influencing films that would follow decades later. These elements would include literature’s penchant for erotic and homoerotic subtext, as found in such stories as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*. Other elements that would be found in Murnau’s film that originate in European literature include the subversion of traditional gender roles and the empowerment of women, as is found in Karl Adolf von Wachsmann’s *Der Fremde* and E.F. Benson’s *The Room in the Tower*. Even the physical attributes of Murnau’s vampire were inspired by earlier literature. The physical appearance of Count Orlok feels like it has been ripped from James Malcolm Rymer’s 1845 novel *Varney the Vampyre*; both sport the same “long nails that literally appear to hang from the finger ends” (29) of “a long gaunt hand, which seems utterly destitute of flesh” (29) as well as the same “gigantic height… and… horrible, protruding, white face” (29). Rymer’s vampire also moves with “a strange, gliding movement” (29) that is very similar to that found in *Nosferatu*. Most of these physical characteristics, when seen on Murnau’s vampire, exude a feminine quality that adds to the vampire’s androgyny. Another element found in *Nosferatu* that has its roots in literature is the vampire’s blurring of traditional notions of gender and sexuality, where the vampire often acts as an archetype of various forbidden sexualities and gender identities. One of the most famous vampire stories of the 19th century, J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s 1872 short story *Carmilla*, demonstrates this perfectly. *Carmilla* presents a story in which the two primary characters, Carmilla and her unnamed victim, are female. In fact, Le Fanu paints the relationship between the two as homoerotic, as shown when Carmilla “take[s] [her victim’s] hand and hold[s] it with a fond pressure, renewed again and again; blushing softly, gazing in [her] face with languid and burning eyes, and breathing so fast that her dress rose and fell with the tumultuous respiration” (n.p.). This scene, as well as others where the two kiss and declare their love for one another, clearly illustrate that this is more than simple friendship.

In *Nosferatu* we also encounter a very strong female character in Ellen, who defies conventional gender norms. This idea of a woman usurping male power could have been inspired by Karl Adolf von Wachsmann’s 1844 tale *Der Fremde*. *Der Fremde* is a text Murnau likely knew, as it originated in Germany and was widely known in the country. While the story’s vampire Azzo is placed in the traditionally masculine role of
the knight and male aggressor (portraying him as having victimized women even before his death), it is not a male who must destroy the vampire, as is the case in Stoker’s *Dracula*, but the vampire’s victim, the young woman Franziska. Indeed, Franziska, rather than being used as a simple excuse for a male hero to do battle with a terrible evil, is competent enough to do the deed herself, with males only offering practical instruction and prayer. Woislow, another knight, trusts her to dispatch Azzo, stating that “…und weil ich Euch dieses zutraue, schlage ich Euch ein Mittel vor, für dessen Gefahrlosigkeit, wie für dessen Erfolg, ich mit meinem Leben haften will, vorausgesetzt, daß Ihr es genau nach meiner Vorschrift anwendet” (“and it is because I trust you that I propose it at all, although for the real harmlessness of the remedy I will answer with my life, provided you follow my directions exactly”) (von Wachsmann 200). As Murnau would have most likely been familiar with this story (it is possible that Stoker was as well), it is possible that it was *Der Fremde*, and not Stoker’s *Dracula*, that provided his primary source of inspiration. Franziska is independent and betrothed to an effeminate man, so called by her because he did not leave to fight in the war against the Turks. In much the same way, Murnau’s Ellen is independent and must protect her incapacitated husband. While it could be argued that *Dracula*’s Johnathan Harker displays feminine characteristics as well, this appears to be linked to the fact that Harker is conceptualized as a Romantic hero rather than as a weak male who is juxtaposed to a strong female. Wolves play an important role in *Dracula*, but Murnau chose to use hyenas in his film. Murnau’s use of the hyena might have had its roots in Wachsmann’s short story as well; though hyenas are not present in *Der Fremde*, the party is attacked by “Rohrwölfen,” or reed-wolves, which appear to be the jackals native to the Balkan Peninsula. Though not specifically connected to sexuality, the jackal, like the hyena, is a devourer of the dead in folklore, and the story notes that it is the female reed-wolves who will lead the attack (von Wachsmann 134).

As illustrated, many stories and legends played an important role in shaping *Nosferatu*. However, it is Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula* which Murnau is most accused of using (and plagiarizing) in his film. There are some similarities: the nails of both Dracula and Orlok are “long and fine, and cut to a sharp point” (Stoker 26), but those of Murnau’s vampire are exaggerated to a point that Murnau could be attempting to accomplish something else, as shall be demonstrated later.

Overall, Murnau seems to have taken little influence from Stoker’s vampire when he created Orlok’s physical appearance: Dracula is a large man, “with a strong [face]… aquiline, with a high bridge of the thin nose… with lofty domed forehead, and hair growing scantily round the temples, but profusely elsewhere… hands… rather coarse-broad, with squat fingers….” (Stoker 25-26). However, the attitudes towards gender and sexuality displayed in *Dracula* became decidedly relevant for the character design of Murnau’s expressionist film *Nosferatu*. Britain in the 1890s, in which Stoker published *Dracula*, and Germany in the 1920s, in which Murnau filmed *Nosferatu*, were both periods that were marked by rising gender equality and a challenging of traditional gender roles, though the pieces handled these changes differently. The historical
context of Stoker’s novel is important, as “the decade in which Bram Stoker wrote and published *Dracula* was one of unprecedented anxiety and uncertainty about the social roles, sexual nature, and natural spheres of activity of men and women” (Eltis 450). This anxiety is mirrored in the portrayal of the novel’s vampire attacks which carry clearly erotic overtones, from the ravaging of Harker’s neck by Dracula’s beautiful vampire brides to the passionate attraction between Mina and Dracula, and even the often-perceived homoerotic overtones in the encounters between Dracula and Harker. It has been noted that “the action within… *Dracula* consists… in an extended battle between two evidently masculine forces, one identifiably good and the other identifiably evil, for the allegiance of a woman” (Craft 116). Dracula’s love of the wolf and his ability to transform into one could be a link to the ancient symbolic nature of the wolf as a symbol of the voracious, masculine sexual predator. However, it is the novel’s concept of crossing gender boundaries, whether it is Dracula attacking Harker or Lucy becoming a sexualized force for evil by succumbing to Dracula’s bite, which becomes the major conflict within the novel. Indeed, within the novel “the traditional dualism most vigorously defended…and most subtly subverted… is… sexual: the division of being into gender, either male or female. Indeed… the vampiric kiss excites a sexuality so mobile… that it threatens to overwhelm the distinctions of gender” (Craft 117). However, it is not just Stoker’s vampires who cross traditional gender boundaries: Mina, “despite… mocking references to the New Woman… is possessed with a number of her commonly recognized attributes” (Eltis 459), and is shown to be intelligent and professional as well as having the desire to care for her husband. Indeed, it is never Mina who breaks down into feminine hysterics, but the men with whom she associates; they do so despite their homosocial behavior, which is displayed to reinforce their masculinity. They are sensitive Romantic heroes, whose male identity is still very much emphasized despite their occasional bouts of feminine behavior. In the end, it is this combination of the masculine and the feminine that serves as the novel’s saving grace, as Count Dracula and the novel’s “sexually predatory vampiric women vividly enact a… cultural panic, but they are defeated by a fluid and surprisingly modern combination of masculine and feminine qualities” (Eltis 465). It is this blending of the masculine and feminine that would reappear in *Nosferatu* and pave the way for the portrayals of the vampire in contemporary film. However, Murnau’s film would create a blending different from the one Stoker utilized: Murnau’s characters, and especially his vampire, are not strictly defined males or females who have attributes of the other sex, but instead they blur gender lines so that the viewer no longer knows who is truly male and who is truly female.

The post-*Dracula* literature would continue the vampire’s legacy as a creature that transcends sexual and gender boundaries. Among the most fascinating is actually another story from Stoker, *Dracula’s Guest*, which was originally meant to serve as a chapter in his novel. Removed in order to shorten the book and not published until 1914, *Dracula’s Guest* displays the same erotic undercurrents that ran throughout *Dracula*, and it also features the wolf as a masculine sexual symbol, as the story involves an
unnamed man (though many presume it to be Harker) being attacked by a wolf. Yet, the attack is not something one would expect from a wild wolf; there is no mauling or clawing, nor does the attack happen outdoors. Instead, the unnamed Englishman awakens in his bed to find the great wolf “lying on [him] and licking [his] throat” (Stoker 170-171). Rather than attacking the Englishman in the woods, this wolf, often assumed to be Dracula, instead attacks his victim in the most intimate of places, the bedroom, and rather than simply killing him, licks at his neck before any sort of penetration occurs. Although this creates a homosexual subtext, the emphasis is placed instead on the wolf as a symbol of masculine sexuality. Even though the sexuality is homosexual in nature, the domineering and predatory nature of Stoker’s wolf is inarguably masculine. This masculine identity and sexuality is something which Murnau would later subvert by replacing the wolf with a hyena, an animal with a far different symbolic meaning.

The female vampire would also return after Dracula’s publication, though not as a bride, but as a major player. Of particular interest is E.F. Benson’s The Room in the Tower. Here, the vampire is, like so many others, female. Yet that is the only similarity Benson’s vampire, Mrs. Stone, has with most other literary female vampires. This female vampire exhibits unusual characteristics compared to other female vampires; in fact, she could be called masculine, meaning that the character of Mrs. Stone furthers the vampire’s long history of subverting traditional roles. Mrs. Stone intentionally and relentlessly targets a male victim without any particular motive besides simple malice, yet rather than taking advantage of any sort of seduction or ruse, Mrs. Stone acts as a cold, calculating predator, taunting her victim for years with the same recurring nightmare. Mrs. Stone is never described as beautiful, vulnerable, or feminine at all, only as a being of pure malice, with “an exuberance wholly malign, a vitality that foamed and frothed with unimaginable evil” (Benson 219). Even her portrait is described in a way as to suggest nothing but pure evil with an expression “instinct with some secret and appalling mirth… shaking with suppressed and nameless glee” (Benson 219) plastered on her face. This vampire has nothing of the traditional “femme fatale” vampire in her; she is not seductive, or a victim, or even someone who simply has a naked self-interest, but instead, Mrs. Stone is a purely evil being with no remorse.

Nosferatu

As we have seen, the literary vampire has a history of subverting traditional gender roles and sexuality. However, it is Nosferatu that would cement this trait as a staple of vampire films by creating, though not the first film vampire, the first androgynous and sexually ambiguous film vampire. There is a trend in vampire cinema that “vampires in the movies are usually bisexual, often letting ambiguity hover… But Murnau’s Nosferatu would seem to be the prototype of another gender, not least because of the vampire’s many animal features” (Elsaesser 86). Orlok’s appearance is the first clue to his gender and sexual identity; as previously mentioned, the vampire looks remarkably like Rymer’s vampire, with little to no influences from Count Dracula. Orlok’s
frail, slight body, “totally bald with an evil witch-like hook nose and protruding eyes,” (Hensley 62) is not something that would be considered traditionally masculine; it is the exact opposite, a feminine body. In many of Murnau’s films, including *Nosferatu*, it is apparent that “although the representation of the feminine is not necessarily stable . . . examples can be found of a clearly-coded feminine displaced onto the body of an aestheticized male-gendered character” (Bergstrom 194) and that “femininity, insofar as it can be associated with eroticism or sexuality, has been displaced from the woman’s body to several kinds of substitutes” (Bergstrom 189), such as the innocent Hutter, who needs to be saved by his wife Ellen, who acts as the hero, a typically male role. This certainly seems to be the case with Count Orlok, whose interactions with the other characters of the film also provide clues about this vampire’s ambiguous identity.

Williams has argued that “the vampire Orlok [sic] (Max Schreck) illustrates an inhuman sexuality which is both repellent and powerfully seductive” (95-96), and nowhere is this clearer than in Orlok’s relationships with the other characters in the film. Orlok, in this adaptation, has no vampire brides with whom to seduce Hutter or, in fact, with whom to entertain himself. Hence, it could be that “the disappearance of female vampirism suggests that the dichotomy which characterizes the representation of female sexuality in the novel is replaced… by a profound ambivalence” (Mayne 30). Instead of being linked to the sexualized “vamp” women of the novel, Orlok is chiefly concerned with males prior to coming across Ellen. Beyond the obvious homosexual implications of Orlok’s master-slave relationship with Renfield, Orlok’s relationship with Hutter also provides evidence towards Orlok’s nonheterosexual identity. Hutter and Orlok’s interactions are often seen as homosocial, but there appears to be an underlying homosexual subtext as well. Hutter is attacked by Orlok as he sleeps, and again in his bedchamber, clearly very intimate settings. However, the vampire’s interest in women, including Hutter’s wife Ellen, negates that Orlok is exclusively homosexual. This heterosexual relationship is just as telling as the homoerotic relationships Orlok entertains with Hutter and Renfield. The relationship between Orlok and Ellen is more passionate, predatory, and lustful than the puppy love shared between Hutter and Ellen. In fact, Ellen, rather than being simply the object of desire for Hutter and Orlok to fight over, serves as a more important character. Ellen’s character clearly reflects Franziska’s in *Der Fremde*, who, like Ellen must free herself from the vampire’s grasp, while the men stand back, either passive (as in the case of Hutter) or as simply offering practical or spiritual advice or guidance (as in the case of Woislow). Ellen must become independent and sexual in order to defeat the vampire, giving herself over to this passionate relationship willingly and dying in the process. Ellen becomes, in her sacrifice, the hero of the tale, rescuing her helpless husband and further twisting the gender expectations of the film’s viewers. Thus, the blending of both masculinity and femininity, and that of heterosexuality and homosexuality, becomes the major foci Murnau’s film, creating characters that defy gender norms as well as sexual ones not by subverting them, but by blurring them.

Perhaps the most unusual allusion to Orlok’s ambiguous gender and sexuality can
be found in Murnau’s use of the hyena in *Nosferatu*. The animal serves as a stand-in for a werewolf, though the hyena looks nothing like a wolf and was most likely harder to obtain than one of the wolves native to the Carpathians. As vampires have been traditionally associated with the wolf in folklore and literature (the work of Stoker included), at first glance the change from wolf to hyena in *Nosferatu* makes little sense. The hyena also makes no appearances in vampire folklore, meaning that this is not hardening back to some less well-known legend or archetype of vampire lore. While it could be a reference to the von Wachsmann text, as both jackals and hyenas serve as archetypal devourers of the dead in folklore, the hyena’s role in folklore also relates intimately with concepts of sex and gender, specifically as they relate to the transgression of traditional gender and sexual norms. This would seem to indicate that the hyena’s placement serves another purpose entirely. On top of being a devourer of the dead, “for centuries natural historians declared that the hyena… could change its sex” due to the “extreme similarity of the genitals of both sexes” and that, because of this, “the hyena could typify sexual perversion or any kind of unnatural behavior” (Rowland 112). The hyena “is regarded as unclean because of this dual nature” (Werness 234), meaning that by using hyenas Murnau could have intended to place the behavior of his vampire in the very specific context of non-binary sexual behavior and gender expression. The association of the hyena with sexual predation and exploitation was already present in Weimar film, being used in the title of the film *Hyänen der Lust*, a 1919 film about human sex trafficking. Murnau’s change in his choice of animal symbol for his vampire from wolf to hyena creates an interesting change in symbolism, as the wolf “carries a vague sexual connotation… [and] has a predatory interest in girls” (Rowland 161). However, Murnau’s hyena is by its nature associated with androgyyny and, in fact, femininity, “while both ancient and modern texts depict the hyena as sexually aberrant in a variety of ways, it comes increasingly in modernity to figure a specifically female deviance of gender norms” (Wilson 757). The transgression of the hyena, and thus that of Murnau’s vampire, create “a terrifyingly all-or-nothing position: to transgress gender is to transgress everywhere” (Wilson 758), as the vampire is not simply a sexual or gender transgressor, but a killer and blood drinker. However, the issue of deviance with the hyena may not simply be femininity, as portrayals “of the medieval hyena suggests that sexual aberration is… its key attribute, and also that what is especially to be anathematized… by way of the hyena is male homosexuality” (Wilson 762). Thus, in associating Orlok with the hyena, Murnau underscores the unspecific gender traits of this vampire and of those the vampire targets.

*Nosferatu*’s portrayal of gender and sexuality are reflective of the larger Weimar culture in which the film was made. The 1920s were marked by changes in gender roles, seeing “the emergence of a new social system in which many women went out to work” (Lacquer 83). The 1920s were also a time when traditional notions regarding gender and sexuality were being questioned, thanks in part to Magnus Hirschfeld’s *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* (Institute for Sexual Research), founded in 1919, which portrayed homosexual, bisexual, and transgender identities not as illness, deviance,
or immorality, but as simply different points on a spectrum of normal human sexual-ity. During the 1920s, numerous bars and publications catered to gay, bisexual, and transgender patrons. There were at least eight known clubs catering specifically to lesbians and fourteen gay magazines in Berlin alone (Gordon 84-88, 110-114). Murnau, himself a gay man, was a part of the thriving LGBT culture of Berlin, likely gaining inspiration from the ideas of these publications and frequenting some of these clubs. Nosferatu was not the only film that was influenced by this more open approach to human sexuality; many of the films of Weimar Germany examined the issues of sexuality and gender in more sympathetic and open ways than Nosferatu, such as Richard Oswald’s 1919 film Anders als die Andern (Different from the Others) and Georg Wilhelm Pabst’s Pandora’s Box (1929).

Sexuality and the occult would also become linked during this period, meaning that Murnau’s sexually ambiguous and androgynous vampire was a fitting figure for the time. “Occultism, nudism, [and]… the cinema” (Lacquer 35) were all very popular and influential to the Weimar culture and popular subjects with moviegoers of the time, so a melding of aspects of the three would be expected. Indeed, the vampire as a sexual creature found a home in Weimar Germany, where “fantasies of female vampires and male supplicants in their thrall jumped from the notepads and canvases of Austrian and German artists into the vast popular imagination” (Gordon 174-177). In fact, sex and the occult were so intertwined that Berliners regarded sex as “a sacred rite or miraculous proof of some paranormal lattice where supernatural fate and deviant desires had become intertwined” (Gordon 193). Even the production of Nosferatu was directly affected by the mixing of sex and the occult, as “between 1926 and 1928, … Albin Grau (the set designer for F.W. Murnau’s vampire epic Nosferatu), [helped to found] a new occult secret society… the Fraternitas Saturni” (Gordon 225), which touted such theological ideas as the existence of Berbelo, a female mirror-image of God which sparked creation. Considering the presence of at least one individual on set involved with the occult and the popularity of the occult in the surrounding culture, it is no surprise that Murnau was influenced by these elements when he created the character of Orlok and created a film that reflected the growing connection between sexuality and the occult in Weimar culture.

Nosferatu’s Influence on Contemporary Vampire Films

In Nosferatu, Murnau created a vampire that transgressed against traditional notions of sexuality and gender, and the fact that this was the first vampire film to gain much notoriety means that this was also the first highly influential vampire film. The films that would follow would create various kinds of vampires, but the trend toward gender and sexual ambiguity started in Nosferatu is one of the most well-known traits of the modern film vampire. While other films, such as those found in the 1980s, would attempt to create strictly masculine vampires that were homosocial rather than homosexual, these portrayals would not endure; the vampires of film would blur traditional
lines of gender and sexuality for decades, most often with a male-identified vampire stepping into the realm of the feminine, though masculine female vampires have been portrayed as well.

*Dracula* (1931), directed by Tod Browning and starring Bela Lugosi, was perhaps the first notable vampire film to be released after Murnau’s film. Browning takes a rather different look at the vampire than Murnau’s film does. Dracula is certainly based on Stoker’s novel and this vampire is very clearly a masculine figure as opposed to the androgynous vampire of Murnau’s film. In this film, Dracula is noble, seductive, and charismatic. While he does feed on male victims, Dracula’s masculinity is strongly emphasized by the reintroduced vampire brides that were conspicuously absent from Murnau’s film. However, rather than leaving Harker for his brides, as he does in the novel, Dracula attacks Harker himself, showing a deeper interest in him than is the case in the novel, a possible reflection on the homosexual subtext between Orlok and Hutter within Murnau’s film. Dracula’s first victim upon landing in England is a young woman, and the attack is eerily reminiscent of the popular image of the 19th-century serial killer Jack the Ripper, popularly depicted as an English gentleman. In the film as in the novel, Dracula begins to slowly change Mina into a vampire, something that does not occur in Murnau’s film. In the film and the novel, it is a male outside force, Van Helsing, who interrupts the process.

After the release of *Dracula* (1931), Roman Polanski’s *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967) in the 1960s would return to the sexually ambiguous and androgynous vampire originally found in Murnau’s film, possibly due to changing attitudes regarding sex that were brought about by the sexual revolution. The film has several vampires, but only two get a significant amount of screen time. The first, Count von Krolock, while noble and sophisticated, is, much like the 1931 interpretation of Dracula, inarguably masculine, hatching devious schemes and pursuing beautiful women, including red-headed Sarah, played by the late Sharon Tate. His son Herbert von Krolock, by contrast, is similar to Orlok, as he exhibits a far less clear-cut gender identity than his father and shows signs of a homosexual orientation. Herbert, while he is sophisticated like his father, is soft-spoken and delicate, with flowing blonde hair and favoring powder blue clothing over the traditional black. His appearance acts as a more blatant transgression of traditional masculinity than Orlok’s sallow, frail body, but the intent to demonstrate feminine qualities is the same. Herbert’s (homo)sexual orientation, like Orlok’s, is implied throughout the film without ever being explicitly stated. When Alfred, assistant to the vampire-hunting professor Abronsius, is reviewing a book on romance, Herbert enters the room in his bedclothes and attempts one of the tactics in the book for seduction, the placement of an arm around the shoulder, on Alfred. This appears to mirror Orlok’s predation of Hutter, albeit in a comedic fashion. The fact that this is an act of seduction rather than a simple act of predation is made much clearer when Count von Krolock, upon revealing his plot to turn Alfred and Abronsius into vampires, states that Herbert and Alfred are to keep each other company in the coming years. While Herbert does not exhibit the same physical appearance that Orlok does,
as this film’s comedic nature does not share the expressionist genre’s emphasis on the grotesque, both vampires exhibit the same predatory seduction toward men and a similar blending of masculine and feminine traits.

_Nosferatu the Vampyre_ (1979), directed by Werner Herzog, expands upon the ambiguity of sexuality and gender identity evoked in the original _Nosferatu_; the vampire sports the same long nails, lithe body, and rat-like face: the look quintessential to the public image of Murnau’s vampire. However, there is more subtext in regards to the sexuality and gender of Murnau’s vampire here than in the original film. This vampire, now not limited to silence, is given a very soft-spoken, almost timid voice, presumably a more feminine characteristic. The vampire’s interactions with Lucy also serve to demonstrate his femininity. This is shown very clearly when the two discuss Johnathan; it is revealed that ever since Johnathan was bitten by _Nosferatu_, he has been “ruined” for Lucy in the way one might consider one’s partner to be ruined or changed after an affair. It is during this conversation that _Nosferatu_ reveals that he envies the love that Lucy and Johnathan have for each other and that he wishes that he could feel that same form of love. In this case, _Nosferatu_ could be seen as a stand-in for a gay man who feels envious of the socially accepted love of someone, a love that he can never feel. Orlok could also be seen as “ruining” Johnathan for his heterosexual partner Lucy by allowing him to realize his true sexual orientation. The fact that this discussion is added to the story of Graf Orlok points to director Werner Herzog’s reading of sexual and gender ambiguity in Murnau’s film, as it is unlikely that this added subtext would appear otherwise.

In a rather striking development, the androgynous and sexually ambivalent vampire seems to disappear during the 80s, though it would resurface with _Interview with the Vampire_ in 1994. The films from this decade instead take their cues from more clearly masculine vampires, such as the one portrayed in Universal Studios’ _Dracula_ (1931). These films also reflect the masculinity-reinforcing culture of the decade, which popularized the heavy metal genre of music and was rife with masculine characters portrayed in other genres of film. The vampire becomes inarguably heterosexual during the 1980s. Traditional forms of masculinity are heavily reinforced in these films, with romance and eloquence being replaced by violence and explicit sexuality. The two clearest examples come from _Fright Night_ (1985) and _The Lost Boys_ (1987).

The vampire of Tom Holland’s _Fright Night_ (1985), Jeffrey, is a clean-cut, handsome man who is at first presumed to be gay. This is due to his vampiric servant, this film’s version of the Renfield character. However, there is no question about Jeffrey’s sexuality as there was about Orlok’s in Murnau’s film; he is entirely heterosexual. While he does take male victims, the first is never shown and the second is merely transformed in order to dispatch the boy who discovered Jeffrey’s identity. In fact, the two female victims we see are attacked in an explicitly sexual manner that is not seen with Jeffrey’s male victims: the first is killed after having sex with Jeffrey, while the second young woman in whom Jeffrey has shown interest is transformed after an erotic encounter with him. This starkly contrasts the erotic undertones present in each
of Orlok’s attacks, whether they are on men or women. Also unlike the vampire of Nosferatu, the vampires of Fright Night exhibit clear roles along the gender binary and a strict heterosexual sexuality. It should also be noted that the vampires in this film demonstrate a grotesque transformation that is very wolf-like, adding to the idea of the wolf as the archetypal symbol of masculine sexuality and predation. Fright Night trades Murnau’s gender-blurring use of the hyena for the more traditional, binary wolf of folklore and literature.

The Lost Boys (1987), directed by Joel Schumacher, again rejects the gender and sexual ambiguity found in Murnau’s film. Rather than exhibiting androgynous or feminine traits, these vampires are the epitome of teenage masculinity. These vampires are, quite literally, teenage boys (with the obvious exception of Star, the lone female vampire of the group) who reflect very clearly the youth culture of the 1980s. They sport leather jackets, stylized hair, and ride motorcycles accompanied by a teenage girl, something popularized by the heavy metal culture. These vampires also serve as the personification of peer pressure, goading teenage Michael into performing darker and darker acts. In fact, throughout all of this, it is Star who acts as a voice of reason. Thus, the vampire tale in this film shifts from being a romantic tale or an exploration of sex and gender into a coming of age story. At first glance, it would seem that The Lost Boys and Fright Night are not at all influenced by Murnau’s film. However, the elements of sex and gender, and the influence of Nosferatu, are not entirely absent. The vampires of these films would be part of a decade-long trend of the rejection of Murnau’s androgynous and sexually ambiguous vampires in favor of strict gender roles and overwhelming heterosexuality, though not in as strict a sense as it might first appear. The grotesque appearance of Murnau’s vampire remains in these films, evidenced by the transformations of these vampires, even if his femininity does not. But, the trend towards these masculine, heterosexual vampires would wane, and the gender and sexually ambiguous vampire first seen in Nosferatu would return in the 1990s after the successful release of Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles in 1994.

Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles (1994), directed by Jordan Neil, is an adaptation of a novel by Anne Rice. This film returns the vampire genre to its roots of questioning and blurring the lines of sexuality and gender. The novel was originally published in 1976, a period when the gay rights movement was experiencing a resurgence, and the story has often been read as a gay allegory. The fact that a film version of the novel was released in the 1990s could be a result of a resurgence of the gay rights movement after the AIDS panic in the 1980s. This film features one of the first film vampires who feels remorse for killing, and who attempts to sustain himself on animal blood. Louis is eloquent and refined, with long hair and a feminine face, a more handsome version of the grotesque feminine found in Graf Orlok. It is in his relationship with his mentor Lestat where the blurring of gender and sexuality is the most prominent. When Louis is first bitten by Lestat, the scene is reminiscent of the coupling of romantic partners; Lestat later returns to Louis’s bedroom in order to make his final proposition to turn Louis into a vampire. As in previous films, this is eerily similar to
Orlok’s attack on Hutter within the latter’s bedchamber. Louis and Lestat go on to act as if they were a married couple, doing everything together, bickering constantly, and even taking in and raising a child (Claudia) together. Louis acts as the subservient partner in his relationship with Lestat. Lestat provides a compelling case as well, acting as an aggressive dandy. Although he will seduce and attack women, he has a preference for young men; in fact it is this affinity for males that ends up being his downfall, as Claudia poisons him with the blood of two dead boys. This appears to be a parallel to how it is Orlok’s obsession with Lucy— and her blood— that would destroy him. Later it is revealed by the vampire Armand, who acts as Louis’s mentor, that vampires aim to be “powerful, beautiful, and without regret.” The physical appearance of the vampire in this film is of importance to its characters; it, in a sense, defines them. In much the same way, Orlok’s physical appearance defined him from his first appearance on film as feminine monstrosity.

*Twilight* (2008), directed by Catherine Hardwicke, provides a fascinating look at gender via its vampires, as neither the good vampires nor the evil vampires completely fit into one specific gender category. All members of the Cullen family are pale with fair hair and are “vegetarians,” meaning that they subsist on the blood of animals. Edward Cullen specifically blurs the line between masculinity and femininity. Edward shows masculine traits, such as intense strength, speed, and a protective instinct, but is also portrayed as emotional and sensitive, traditionally feminine characteristics. Edward’s appearance is also considered a crucial aspect, though the focus is on his physical beauty, as he is referred to several times as “beautiful” or “gorgeous,” (as opposed to the grotesque appearance of Orlok). However, the notion of sexuality and vampirism are automatically linked is not promoted by this film. In fact, while *Nosferatu* clearly linked vampirism and sex, *Twilight* creates a clear divide between purity and sexuality; the Cullens do not partake in human blood, a common metaphor for sexual activity, nor do they engage in sex acts themselves or dress in stimulating ways. The antagonistic vampires, by contrast, have no qualms about feeding on humans or engaging in heated relationships. This creates an interesting twist on the vampire as a sexual being; though still androgynous and presented with a similar focus on appearance as in *Nosferatu*, the “vegetarian” vampires of *Twilight* become symbols of virgin purity rather than of sexuality.

However, the androgynous vampire is not always male. At times, rather than create a sensitive or beautiful male-identified vampire, a film will instead place male characteristics on a female vampire. This has become especially prominent in the last decade, with films of several genres striving to create stronger female protagonists. But in vampire film, this merely involves taking an already-established trend and turning it on its head. It is not the male vampire who becomes weak or passive, but the female vampire who becomes strong and aggressive. The weak, passive male vampire of years past, with some exceptions, is removed from most mainstream film, with strong, independent female vampires rising to take center stage.

The protagonist of Len Wiseman’s *Underworld* (2003), Selena, is a female-iden-
tified vampire with male traits. She is one of the few female Death Dealers, warriors devoted to the task of killing Lycans (werewolves). As such, she is shown to be highly skilled at both ranged and hand-to-hand combat, able to kill Lycans much larger than herself with relative ease. Indeed, her work of killing Lycans is such an integral part of her life that she is told that “[she takes] this warrior business way too seriously.” Selena differentiates herself from the other female vampires of her coven by never wearing the dresses that they do, at one point even being told to “put on something elegant,” for a party, which she does not. In many ways, this reflects the independent nature of Nosferatu’s Ellen; both of whom take it upon themselves to protect those around them. This is the case even if they are specifically told not to protect others and/or if they are warned that protecting others may cause a threat to their lives. The differences in the respective roles of Selena and Ellen are merely reflections of the power available to women, and the differing concepts of the role of women in the films’ reflect the attitudes toward women at the times when the films were produced. It should be noted that Selena uses all of this strength and skill in order to protect a newly bitten Lycan, Michael, saving him numerous times due to her having knowledge that he lacks. This is similar to how Ellen gains the knowledge to save Hutter and must take the initiative to save him, though this film places the role of the heroine to a vampire. Interestingly, the traits of the traditional victim are instead placed on the male who would usually be expected to be the hero. Selena is certainly not the traditional female vampire; she is neither a seductress nor a predator, but she mirrors the androgynous traits of the Nosferatu vampire in order to create a “masculine” heroine, although she also mirrors the masculine traits of Murnau’s Ellen.

Let Me In (2010), directed by Matt Reeves, is a remake of Tomas Alfredson’s 2008 film Let the Right One In. It is quite an unusual film in its portrayal of the vampire, as in this film, the vampire is a twelve-year-old (in appearance) girl, Abby. Abby is not quite like other middle school girls; she has a somber outlook on life and takes on the role of the protector of a young boy, Owen. She demonstrates not only that she is intelligent and capable, as shown by her love of complex puzzles, but she also demonstrated immense strength. The idea of immense strength in a body that would not seem to be capable of it also links back to Murnau’s film, as Orlok is capable of great strength despite his thin, bony stature. This is even more intriguing when one considers that even in contemporary media, female vampires are often sexual, deceptive, or both, and Abby is most often neither. In fact, rather than the sexual ambiguity of Nosferatu, it is strictly the androgyny of Count Orlok which is reflected in Let Me In. The grotesque vampire of Murnau’s film is also on occasion found in Let Me In, as Abby goes through more than one gory transformation. Thus, while Abby is in many ways like young girls, she exhibits personality traits and physical abilities not normally associated even with female vampires, thus extending the concept of the androgynous vampire to encompass child vampires as well.
Conclusion

F.W. Murnau’s 1922 film *Nosferatu* has done much to influence contemporary vampire film, especially in regards to how sexuality, gender identity, and androgyny are portrayed in vampire film. Murnau took concepts from preexisting literature and folklore and created the first truly influential vampire film. However, despite common allegations, it is not only from Stoker’s Dracula that F.W. Murnau took his inspiration, but also from other works of European literature. From the physical appearance of Rymer’s Varney to the sexual and erotic undertones present in the works of Stoker and Le Fanu, the female vampires and the veiled homoeroticism of vampire literature contributed to the design of Graf Orlok, whose sexuality and gender identity transcend the traditional binaries to create an androgynous, sexually ambivalent creature who preys upon both men and women, and who can only be defeated by a woman. Murnau created a creature that was a perfect fit for the sexually liberated, occult-loving culture of Weimar Berlin that, much like the hyena used in the film, by its very nature transgresses traditional sexual and gender boundaries. *Nosferatu’s* elements of sexuality and gender would continue as a staple of vampire films far more so than the masculinity of the often-credited Dracula of Bram Stoker and Tod Browning, forever marking the vampire as a being that challenges traditional sexuality and gender norms. Vampire films are cultural products that mirror the attitudes toward sexuality and gender identity that prevailed during the eras when the films were produced. Vampire films have expounded the values of the sexual revolution and gay rights movements in the ‘60s and ‘70s, as well as the testosterone-driven ‘80s. The vampire has also returned, albeit with a more feminine skin, with the reemergence of feminism as a political movement in the new millennium. *Nosferatu* has often been ignored by those outside of film studies, but it would be a mistake to discount this film, as it holds the key to our current understanding of the vampire and will likely continue to do so.
End Notes

1. *Nosferatu* was preceded by films such as Rudyard Kipling’s *The Vampire* (1910), Robert G. Vignola’s 1913 film of the same name, and the *Les Vampires* (1915) series of Louis Feuillade.

2. While Summers attributes *De Masticatione Mortuorum* to Philip Rohr, other scholars attribute it to Michael Ranft and assert that it instead dates from 1725.

3. As previously mentioned, both vampires exhibit the same “long nails that literally appear to hang from the finger ends” of “a long gaunt hand, which seems utterly destitute of flesh” as well as the same “gigantic height… and… horrible, protruding, white face” (29). Rymer’s vampire also moves with “a strange, gliding movement” (29) similar to Graf Orlok’s.

4. This interest in girls specifically is confirmed by the trend in folklore that wolves in folklore often “act as sexual predators threatening children, especially girls” (Rowland 437).

5. Hirschfeld was a renowned physician, sexologist and gay and transgender rights activist whose work spanned from the late 19th century until his efforts were halted by the rise of the Nazi party in 1933.

6. Universal Studios was given the rights to Dracula by Bram Stoker’s widow, Florence Balcombe.

7. *In Let the Right One In*, the vampire, here called Eli, is not a girl. Instead, Eli is presented as an androgynous being, stating matter of factly, “I’m not a girl.”

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