

# Representations, genre and wider contexts:

## the vampire as metaphor in *Let the Right One In* and *Twilight*

**Duncan Yeates** explores how the dark world of the vampire can help students of AQA's MEST 3 unpick concepts of representation, and their symbolic and political meanings.

The upcoming academic year will see the introduction of the new A2 Media Studies specification by AQA. Its first module, MEST 3, focuses on Critical Perspectives – a topic featuring two areas for investigation and exploration: **representations in the media** and **the impact of new digital media**. Students are encouraged to use these topic areas as a jumping off point to conduct their own research as opposed to relying on a teacher-led approach on one subject. So, what should a case study look like?

To begin with, a close examination of the new specification makes the expectations of MEST 3 clear.

**Candidates will be given two pre-set topics for study during the year, which they will explore across one or more of the three media platforms [...] Each of the topic areas will allow candidates to explore media issues and debates, theory and wider contexts [...] Each individual candidate should produce a case study of their own choice for each pre-set topic selected.**

In this article, I will be looking at the **representations of vampires in the media**. I have decided to focus on two very current texts to enable a more lively and relevant discussion of context. My case study focuses on the following:

- **an analysis** of how vampires are constructed in the media

- **the political/social context** surrounding representations of vampires and the effects they have on audiences
- **cross-cultural contextual factors** in the representation of vampires in the media. My hypothesis is that **vampires serve as metaphors for exploring social taboos and making political statements** – in Freudian terms they can be used to embody the idea of the id – pure animalistic urge and desire unrestrained by the civilising ego or super ego. This lack of refinement and bestial status enables writers and film-makers to explore more controversial ideas than they could with human characters.

*Let the Right One In* (dir. Tomas Alfredson) is a Swedish vampire film adapted into a screenplay by John Ajvide Lindqvist from his original novel.

An interesting anecdote about the production of the film is when the project was started the producer John Nordling was selected by Lindqvist as producer even though by his own admission, he was '48th on the list' of the desired producers. The reason? A shared vision with Lindqvist of how the movie should be made.

### The vampire stereotype

Consider the stereotypical representation of vampires and there are a few broad codes and generic conventions. These include pale skin, dark clothing, fangs, blood, and an inability to

withstand sunlight or to enter a house unless invited. However, *Let the Right One In* makes it harder than your average vampire movie to identify who fits this stereotypical representation: Eli has pale skin, a mysterious manner and black hair, but it is her servant or protector, Hakan, who stalks and kills local residents, hanging them upside down to drain their blood. Later on in the film, we see Eli engage in some much more typical Vampiric behaviour such as licking up Oskar's spilt blood and attacking two unsuspecting citizens. Even so, the number of killings perpetrated by Eli is low compared with many other conventional 'vampire' movies. In effect, Eli spends less screen time being a vampire than she does being a friend and protector to the subliminally aggressive Oskar. Therefore, it could be suggested that the representation of vampires in *Let the Right One In* is deliberately subtle to **discourage a dominant 'horror flick' reading and direct the audience to its much more salient points about Swedish society.**

**The dominant representation of Sweden** in the media is as a liberal country with a low crime rate and excellent public health service. However, other oppositional readings suggest it suffers from problems with gang culture and violence, as well as an increase in mental problems amongst its young people. According to the publication, *Nursing Science & Research in the Nordic Countries*

published on 22nd December 2006:

**In Sweden, mental disorders or ill health is one of the major public health problems in children and young people. Government studies have shown that at least 5-10% of all young people have some sort of mental problem [...] Mental problems can involve internal problems (e.g., anxiety, depression and somatic complaints), they can constitute external problems (e.g., aggressiveness and lack of self-control) and they can involve difficulties in concentration.**

[http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary\\_0286-32164193\\_ITM](http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-32164193_ITM)

## Vampires and violence

Oskar and Eli's relationship and their behaviour could be considered an on-screen embodiment of some of these issues. Although Oskar is bullied he represses his aggression, lacking the confidence to act upon his violent urges. Earlier on in the film he is shown attacking a telephone mast with a knife, fantasising that it is one of his bullies. Additionally, towards the end of the film when Eli rescues him from the bullies he fears, his relief, pleasure and ambivalence are palpable even though one child is shown to be brutally decapitated. Oskar is not a vampire and his behaviour is disturbing to say the least.

This then leads us to the crux of our argument that one of the institutional values and ideologies behind this film is **social and political commentary**. Eli's fairly understated representation as a vampire enables the film to address its Swedish audience and make some social comments about the behaviour of its young people. To consider the issue of increasing mental disturbance amongst young people offers the viewer the **Blumler and Katz use and gratification of surveillance**. Eli's status as a non-human character enables a more graphic and serious exploration of what is in

stark fact a pre-pubescent murderer and her accomplice. Thus Eli serves as a metaphor and a way of exploring these issues that is much more palatable to an audience than a 'real child murderer'.

To wrap up the film's more universal relevance, with some consideration of cross-cultural context, the Hammer Films have an English version planned for 2010. Could there be an equally relevant message here for the 'alienated' youth of Britain?

## Twilight

Stephenie Meyer's novel *Twilight* has also received the film adaptation treatment (dir. Catherine Hardwicke) and, interestingly, despite a larger cast of vampire characters it does not really

Cullen, with Eli he is somewhat neutered. Unlike Eli he is able to go out in the daylight, he is conventionally attractive – something which is often a key feature of vampire lore. Pale and possessing a pair of fangs, he fails to use them due to his abstinence from human blood-taking. He evinces a much stronger ability to control himself than Eli whose desperation is relayed throughout *Let the Right One In*. Equally, his presence in the mise-en-scène of a country home with a nuclear family contrasts starkly with Eli's secluded and transient existence. In short, if the representation of Eli in *Let the Right One In* is subtle, the representation of Cullen in *Twilight* is practically subversive using the barest minimum of the codes and conventions of the horror genre to signify his vampire status. Why he is



surpass *Let the Right One In* in its use of blood-sucking codes and conventions. Fundamentally, the representations here are more homogenised and inoffensive; the film is marketed as a romance to increase its mainstream appeal. If we compare the main vampire character, Edward

represented in this way?

*Twilight* is a mainstream movie with a big production company behind it. Initially, the film was in production for three years at Paramount before being put into pre-production by Summit Entertainment. When released it grossed over £70

million in the US and Canada alone. How does a 'vampire' film make this kind of money?

Horror and vampire movies are often associated with a Goth or sub-cultural audience demographic – something likely to alienate many people who consider themselves part of mainstream society. Therefore, much like *Let the Right One In*, the codes and conventions of the horror genre in *Twilight* are blunted and represented in a more generic way to avoid disengaging a mass audience, while the codes and conventions of romance are promoted to attract them. This also has the effect of making the film's ideological messages more far-reaching.

**Sexuality and abstinence**

Ideologically, Edward Cullen's passion for blood is a metaphor for the sexual urge. America has

a huge problem with teenage pregnancy and has the highest birth rate amongst teenagers in the developed world. According to figures from UNICEF, 55.6 of every 1000 American teenagers between the ages of 15-19 fall pregnant each year. (UNICEF, July 2001; <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/repcard3e.pdf>). The consequence of this problem is that many American teenagers from Evangelical Christian backgrounds have taken the Virginity Pledge – a promise to remain sexually abstinent until they are married. Can it be a coincidence that Meyer herself is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints?

Therefore, it could be argued that by sticking closely to the plot and authorial messages of the original book, the institutions behind the film version of *Twilight* have infused it with an

ideology of sexual abstinence where the central vampire character serves as a metaphor for the male sexual urge.

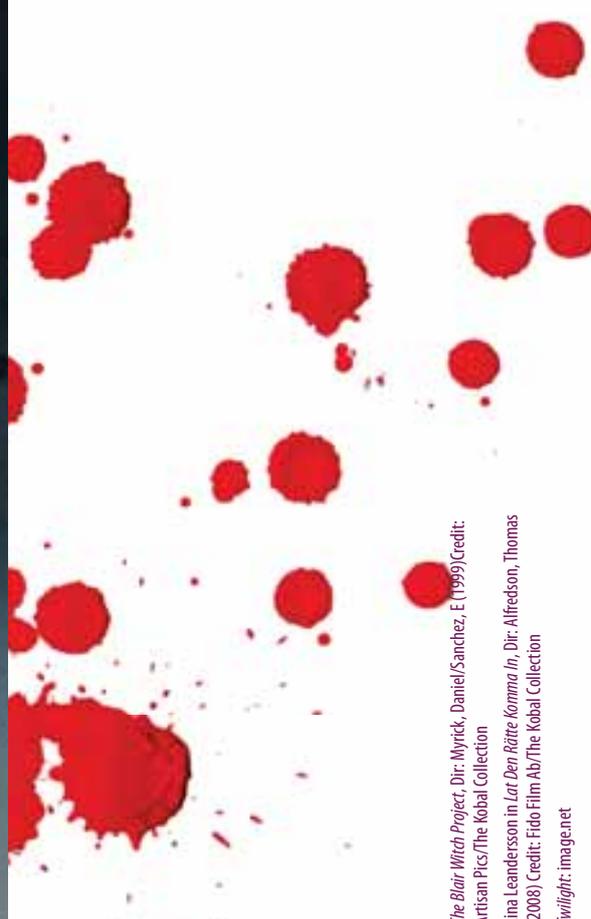
Regarding cross-cultural contexts, *Twilight* has also been a great success in Britain, a country that is similarly concerned with its teenage pregnancy rates. Interestingly, Robert Pattinson has been touted as a sex symbol by gossip and celebrity magazines – publications that are often aimed at a young female target audience demographic. This leaves us with one final question connected to *Twilight's* cross cultural appeal and mass success – is Pattinson a poster boy for sexual abstinence?

It is interesting to speculate what the future holds for the codes and conventions of the on-screen vampire as it becomes progressively more homogenised. Could removing the real fangs from two of its most mainstream representations in recent years result in less biting social commentary from the powerfully symbolic figure of the vampire?

Duncan Yeates teaches Media and is a Deputy Head of English at Mounts Bay School in Penzance, Cornwall.

**MoreMediaMag**

*Let the Right One In* seems to have captured everyone's imagination since its release. To see some recent responses, visit **MoreMediaMag** and read a selection of reviews from AQA AS students at Wreake Valley Community College, Leicester. And watch out for our Fantasy issue in February, when Eli and Oskar might just make another appearance...



The Blair Witch Project, Dir: Myrick, Daniel/Sanchez, E. (1999) Credit: Artisan Pics/The Kobal Collection  
 Lina Leandersson in *Let Den Rätte komma in*, Dir: Alfredson, Thomas (2008) Credit: Fido Film Ab/The Kobal Collection  
 Twilight: image.net