

The 19th British Silent Film Festival



Vampyr (Vampyr: Der Traum des Allan Gray) (1932)

Saturday 16 September, 8pm: with Minima and Stephen Horne



Production company: Carl Theodor Dreyer-Filmproduktion, Tobis-Filmkunst

Director: Carl Dreyer

Producer: Carl Dreyer, Nicholas de Gunzburg

Screenplay: Carl Dreyer, Christen Jul

Inspired by the stories of: Sheridan Le Fanu

Cinematography: Rudolph Maté

Editor: Carly Dreyer

Cast: Julian West (David Gray), Henriette Gérard (Marguerite Chopin), Sybille Schmitz (Léone), Renee Mandel (Gisèle), Maurice Schutz (Bernard, lord of the manor), Jan Hieronimko (Marc, the doctor), Jane Mora (Nurse), Albert Bras (Joseph, servant at the manor), N. Babanini (Jeanne, housekeeper)

"The only film worth watching . . . twice . . ." (Alfred Hitchcock)

Vampyr was based on two stories from J. Sheridan Le Fanu's collection *In a Glass Darkly*. It was Carl Dreyer's first production after his *Passion of Joan of Arc* in 1928 – and his first sound film. Vampyr offers a sensual immediacy that few, if any, works of cinema can claim to match. Dreyer leads the viewer, as though guided in a trance, through a realm akin to a waking-dream. The score was conceived and written in 2015-16, in collaboration with the internationally renowned silent film pianist and multi-instrumentalist Stephen Horne. Vampyr is a film of superimposed worlds: the film bridges the eras of silent and sound films, with the story itself positioned in a zone somewhere between reality and the supernatural. Dialogue and Foley sounds from the original soundtrack are woven into the live performance which features a new array of musical instruments. <http://www.minimamusic.co.uk/vampyr/>

About Minima: Minima's music is a 21st-Century interpretation of the images of silent film. Formed in 2006, Minima perform in cinemas and art centres, as well as music and film festivals, playing original live soundtracks to silent films. Minima are a Bristol-based four-piece group, with instrumentation including cello, double bass, baritone guitar, acoustic and electric guitars, mandolin, autoharp, dulcimer, synthesizer, glockenspiel and

drum kit. We have written for contemporary filmmakers and also offer masterclasses in silent film accompaniment. Our sound is uncompromising and unique; in performance we use no backing tracks or pre-recorded material.

Anne Bilson, 'Vampyr', *Guardian*, 22 October, 2010:

"I wanted to create a waking dream on screen and show that horror is not to be found in the things around us but in our own subconscious," said Danish film-maker Carl Theodor Dreyer, whose loose adaptation of two stories from Sheridan Le Fanu (*Carmilla* and *The Room in the Dragon Volant*) was initially conceived as a silent movie. Sound was added during production, but the film's trance-like images could stand on their own as a visual poem in which the action seems to take place on the cusp of dreams and reality.

Apart from German actress Sybille Schmitz, who plays the vampire's chief victim, and French actor Maurice Schutz, who plays her father, the cast was non-professional. Baron Nicolas de Gunzberg, who provided finance for the film, also took the leading role under the pseudonym Julian West. He plays a roving occult investigator called Allan Grey (David in some versions) who arrives at an old inn by the side of a river and explores a nearby castle where an evil doctor appears to be helping a vampire prey on the lord's two daughters – one of whom is bedridden, suffering from a strange sickness, while the other is being held captive. Grey reads a book on vampirism and acts as our surrogate in this curious realm of crooked staircases, off-kilter corridors and Freudian keys and doors, a world where men's shadows take on a life of their own and skeletal hands grasp bottles of poison.

Dreyer shrugs off conventional linear narrative and takes an experimental approach, plunging us into a waking nightmare that isn't so much black-and-white as it is misty grey. When cinematographer Rudolph Maté (who would later direct films such as the noir thriller *DOA*) showed Dreyer some frames made hazy by accidental exposure to light, the director had him place a layer of gauze in front of the lens to replicate the effect for the rest of the film.

Many of the images from this movie have passed into horror iconography: an old man standing by the river tolling a bell with a scythe over his shoulder; Grey's dream of being buried alive; the evil doctor suffocating in flour dropped from the mill above. It's hard to spot where nightmares end and reality begins. This really is a film that exemplifies the idea of dreaming with our eyes open.

Programme note compiled by Jenny Stewart



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