





# THERE WILL BE BLOOD

## *Daybreakers and the Vampire Movie*

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The enduring popularity of the vampire figure has led to some truly creative and original films as well as some downright disasters. **Rjurik Davidson** examines the current fascination with this genre and explores why the latest Australian offering fails to deliver despite its very promising beginning.

**T**HE VAMPIRE is the fantasy figure of the moment. Where only five years ago it was the ubiquitous boy magician Harry Potter who dominated fantasy film, now it is the vampire. Almost like a symbol of itself – transmitting dangerously out of control like a virus – the vampire has spread throughout popular culture, largely on the back of Stephenie Meyer’s wildly popular *Twilight* books and movies (*Twilight* [Catherine Hardwicke, 2008], *New Moon* [Chris Weitz, 2009]), so that there are now vampire weddings, vampire bands, a flurry of vampire novels and vampire television shows like *True Blood*. Recently, *The Age* reported that we are a nation obsessed with ‘vampires and AFL’ and that *New Moon* and *Twilight* were the most Googled movies in Australia during 2009.<sup>1</sup> One of the great attractions of the vampire is that it can be a symbol for many things. As a symbol for the decaying aristocracy in Bram Stoker’s classic 1897 novel *Dracula*, the vampire has the allure of charisma and sex. Indeed, *Dracula* drew upon John Polidori’s 1819 portrait of Lord Byron in *The Vampyre*. In the symbol of the vampire, sex and death are entwined in the single act of drinking someone’s blood.

Of course, the vampire never really went out of fashion: vampire novels are well known for being commercially viable and, since the 1922 classic *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* by F.W. Murnau, vampire films have graced the screen with singular regularity.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Anne Rice’s series *The Vampire Chronicles*, starting with *Interview with the Vampire* in 1976 (filmed by Neil Jordan in 1994), was wildly successful. During its run from 1997 to 2003, Joss

Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (following on from the eponymous 1992 film, directed by Fran Rubel Kuzui and written by Whedon) revolutionised genre television. Where Rice (and filmmaker Jordan) made the vampire the point-of-view character and turned it into an existential figure, Whedon made the vampire postmodern, playing with genre expectations for fun and laughs.

*Twilight* (both book and film) has neither of these positive features; rather, it rehashes conventional vampire tropes. More importantly, it combines the vampire with a Mills & Boon-style romance, and has been strongly criticised by feminists. 'Bella Swan is no Buffy Summers,' notes Laura Miller at Salon.com. 'It's hard to imagine,' she writes of the *Twilight* series' heroine,

*a person more insecure, or a situation better set up to magnify her insecurities ... she spends the better part of every novel alternately cowering in their protective arms or groveling before their magnificence. 'How well I knew that I wasn't good enough for him' is a typical musing on her part.*<sup>3</sup>

As a film, *Twilight* avoids this internal dialogue but, despite a certain vitality, maintains Bella as a fairly passive protagonist who needs to be rescued by the perfect but tortured Edward, who continues the Byronic tradition – and here the vampire again represents forbidden sex. Indeed, it perfectly symbolises the state of the teenage girl who is enamoured with her boyfriend and wants him to 'take her' but is aware of the terrible danger that this represents: sex is both alluring and terrifying. *Twilight* is thus pitched unmistakably at these teenage girls, who form the core of its fan base.

Released almost concurrently with *Twilight* was the Swedish vampire movie *Let the Right One In* (Tomas Alfredson, 2008), a kind of Ingmar-Bergman-meets-George-A.-Romero film that uses the vampire to symbolise the outcast and lonely child. Showing the versatility of the vampire figure, the film languorously examines the life of twelve-year-old Oskar (Kåre Hedebrant), who is bullied at school and left alone by his mother who works at night. He befriends his new neighbour, Eli (Lina Leandersson), an equally lonely child vampire. The film argues that these two children are essentially alike, both outcasts from the world. Set among the snowy suburbs of Stockholm, *Let the Right One In* is atmospheric and moving – a brilliant arthouse horror movie.

Against this background comes the new Australian action-thriller *Daybreakers* (Peter and Michael Spierig, 2009), which deploys the figure of the vampire in yet another fashion. The premise is that by 2019 the vast majority of the world's population are vampires, with the exception of the 'fugitives'. The Spierig brothers do an exceptional job of representing this vampire world in the early sections of the movie. To avoid light, vampires drive cars with blackened windows and external cameras that project the outside onto a screen. And, in a

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delightful touch, coffee is served with blood. Moreover, the lack of humans means that there are 'blood shortages' that are progressively becoming critical. The only source of blood is 'farmed' from humans kept in suspended animation – hung in great warehouses – by a great corporate monolith owned by Charles Bromley (Sam Neill). The Spierig brothers have transformed the vampire into a symbol for a decaying world. Things are falling apart, their film argues. See how bad things have become? We're all practically vampires.

Into this world, the Spierig brothers place Edward (Ethan Hawke), a haematologist who works for Bromley's corporation, which is also attempting to manufacture synthetic blood to replace the dwindling human supply. Edward, we discover, has a conscience. Struck by the same existential dilemma as Louis in *Interview With the Vampire*, Edward cannot bring himself to drink human blood. But there is a devastating consequence to this: vampires who do not drink blood, or who drink their own in desperation, become 'subsiders': degenerated animalistic vampires, inhuman in appearance and mentality. Edward is facing such a devolution if he does not drink human blood, or find a substitute or a cure. Hawke is excellently cast in this role: never the most expressive actor, his face remains impassive and his expressions underplayed, but his eyes are typically haunted.

One night, Edward accidentally crashes his car into some outlaw humans, including Audrey (her scant part played with sufficient aplomb by Claudia Karvan), and he helps them escape. He discovers that one of the humans, the tough southerner called Elvis (the intense Willem Dafoe), holds the secret to reversing vampirism. But, of course, such a feat would threaten Bromley's corporation's profits – here the film carries a strong anti-corporate message – and so the final climax is set up.

It is interesting to note that the anti-corporate message has become common within film (indeed Hollywood is sometimes criticised by conservatives for its liberal leanings). Quite often, the corporation is the 'bad guy', which is definitely a more sophisticated world view than simply presenting us with a bad guy who is evil 'by nature'. For at least in the anti-corporate movie there are plausible motivations – profit, monopoly, control. Here the world of *Daybreakers* provides a nice science fiction element, in which blood is a commodity to be bought and sold, and is subject to the laws of supply and demand. In the eyes of producer Chris Brown:

*Daybreakers is a lot like the great science fiction films that were made during the 1950s. They commented on what happened politically in their time, in terms of communism or the bomb. And so it's exciting that Daybreakers does the same thing.*<sup>4</sup>

Ethan Hawke also believes that 'There's this kind of deep counterculture vein running through [*Daybreakers*]'.<sup>5</sup> If these issues are not deeply examined, they are at least playfully presented.

*Daybreakers* is filmed in loving detail by the Spierig brothers and director of photography Ben Nott. The world is much like our own, though it has a 1940s noir feel, reinforced by the fact that it is mostly filmed at night. In the opening sections there is a great attention to the *mise en scène*, which is so crucial in genre movies (think of the brilliant attention to detail in *Blade Runner* [Ridley Scott, 1982] or *Children of Men* [Alfonso Cuarón, 2006]). *Daybreakers* production and costume designer George Liddle explains that

*Our vampire world is very cold, with greys and black and white, and the costumes reflect that. We made the sets quite modern*

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ALL IMAGES FROM *DAYBREAKERS*

and hard-edged, using blocks of grey and black fitted with fluorescent strip lights. And then the human world – the sanctuary – has a lot more warmth and tone.<sup>6</sup>

Despite what myriad reviewers seem to think, *Daybreakers* is not an original concept.<sup>7</sup> The first novel to propose a world populated almost entirely by vampires, in which humans are outlaws, was Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (poorly 'adapted' into a Will Smith vehicle – is there nothing he can't ruin? – in 2007 by Francis Lawrence). In Matheson's hands, the vampire stands as a symbol for increasing conformity in the 1950s, a world where you are alone in the suburbs, alienated from your neighbours, and where everyone around you might just be horrors. But what the Spierig brothers are able to do is take this idea and apply fine science fiction minds to building their own modern version of such a world.

'World building' is one of the defining pillars of science fiction, whose method is to propose a key 'speculative concept' – in this case that the world's population have become vampires – and then logically extrapolate from this fact. What would the world be like, science fiction asks, if this fact were true? What can we assume? What are the consequences? There is no doubt that in its opening sections, *Daybreakers* is a triumph in this area. As a viewer, the first half-hour is a profoundly estranging experience, where you continually wonder at this vampire civilisation. *Daybreakers* does exactly what smart genre films should do: it gives us a world we at once don't recognise, but it convinces us of its plausibility.

But for a film that starts so strongly, *Daybreakers* loses its way halfway through. Firstly, there are a number of unconvincing subplots, which are the result of failures not in the directing but the writing. Edward's relationship with his brother, Frankie (Michael Dorman), and Bromley's with his daughter, Alison (Isabel Lucas), are clumsy. There are hints of a romance between Edward and Audrey, but this never seems to go anywhere. And, most importantly, the 'cure' for vampirism makes little logical sense at all.

In terms of direction, *Daybreakers* is also not without its flaws. At times the film degenerates unnecessarily into splatter: when the corporation tests its synthetic blood on a 'private', his body explodes, showering those in the vicinity with blood and gore. It is a silly and immature moment, a hangover from the pulp origins of the horror genre. Here we might remember that the Spierig brothers come from a horror

background and that their first feature was the zombie movie *Undead* (2003).

More seriously, the film starts as a concept piece, exploring a vampire world and examining human concerns within it. But from about halfway through it shifts gears, as if the Spierig brothers panicked, thought to themselves 'Who is going to watch this?' and decided to make the film commercially appealing by turning it into an action movie. So the bulk of the second half is taken up by a chase sequence as Edward and the humans attempt to escape the corporation, and then finally infect the vampires with the nonsensical 'cure' they have discovered. What begins mysteriously, tantalisingly and sophisticatedly reduces itself to stock formula action. We begin the film with a sense of estrangement, but by the end have settled back into easy and banal familiarity. Even the direction seems to lose its way by the end: gone are the light touches and subtle camera shots.

This problem – slipping from intelligent and sensitive to heavy handed and formulaic – is a professional hazard of genre film. Indeed, this shift happens so often that we can only presume there are larger forces at work. To pick just one example, Danny Boyle's *Sunshine* (2007) opens with a great and powerful meditation on the sun, both as scientific object and mythic symbol. It starts as a concept piece, awakening in the viewer a sense of the mystical life force of the sun and examining its powerful effects on the human psyche. Halfway through, like *Daybreakers*, it jumps tracks and becomes an action-thriller, losing all sense of estrangement and reverting to formula.

This larger force can only be the commercial imperative of the search for an audience. Too many writers and filmmakers seem to hold the erroneous conception that a powerful final act must involve physical action, that excitement is generated primarily by violence and death. Indeed, there is an element of truth to this, for what fact is more dramatic in anyone's life than the threat of his or her impending death? It is just this kind of drama that the final act of a film like *Blade Runner* relies upon. But too often in film, action is played by numbers and emptied of content. Too often we feel that none of these deaths have any weight. Too often bodies are piled upon bodies as a substitute for the drama, as if the sheer quantity of death will somehow result in a leap in the film's quality. As viewers we think, 'Oh, I've seen this before.' *Daybreakers* is by no means one of the worst offenders in this matter, but it is an offender nonetheless.

Indeed, both *Daybreakers* and *Sunshine* fail at the critical moment. Give viewers a slow beginning but a splendid ending, and they will forgive you and leave the cinema alive with your vision. Give them a powerful opening but fail them in the final act, and they will head home disappointed or deflated. From a writer's point of view, each act should be better than the previous one, but certainly the final act must be the *pièce de résistance*.<sup>8</sup>

*Daybreakers*, then, is that most frustrating of films: one that promises so much, and initially delivers so much, but that refuses, as if by a failure of nerve, to pursue its premises all the way down the line, preferring to fall back on standard commercial structures. No doubt it is a better movie than most out there; no doubt it makes *Twilight* and *New Moon* look like the cardboard cut-outs they are. If the *Twilight* franchise relies on the most conventional and conservative use of the vampire, *Daybreakers* stands at the more innovative end of the spectrum, where the figure can be used to examine the contemporary world, as a way of estranging that world and having the viewer see it anew. All in all, *Daybreakers* gives us moments of brilliance and wonder that don't quite sustain themselves throughout the movie. Yet a few moments of brilliance and wonder are still worth the price of admission.

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#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See Leesha McKenny, 'Searches Show a Nation Obsessed with Vampires and AFL', *The Age*, 2 December 2009, <<http://www.theage.com.au/technology/technology-news/searches-show-a-nation-obsessed-with-vampires-and-afl-20091202-k4qw.html>>, accessed 15 January 2010.
- <sup>2</sup> The world's pre-eminent horror editor, Ellen Datlow – herself editor of the vampire collections *Blood is Not Enough* (Ace Books, 1994) and *A Whisper of Blood* (William Morrow and Company, 1991) – once said to me that 'Vampire novels always sell'.
- <sup>3</sup> See Laura Miller, 'Touched by a Vampire', *Salon.com*, 30 July 2008, <<http://www.salon.com/books/review/2008/07/30/Twilight/index.html>>, accessed 15 January 2010.
- <sup>4</sup> Hoyts Distribution, 'Daybreakers Production Notes', p.4.
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p.4.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p.7.
- <sup>7</sup> Just one example is Frank Wilkins, 'If Vampires Ruled the World', *ReelTalk*, <<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?type=review&id=3253>>, accessed 17 January 2010.
- <sup>8</sup> This is an idea I first heard from scriptwriting teacher Robert McKee.