

Sequence Analysis of Tomas Alfredson's *Låt den rätte komma in* (2008)

(Danny Concha)

Tomas Alfredson's unconventional vampire film, *Let the Right One In* (*Låt den rätte komma in*, 2008) is a masterclass in genre hybridity. Adapted from John Ajvide Lindqvist's bestselling novel, the film presents both an 'unequivocal vampire tale' and 'a moving, elegantly crafted story of isolation and connection'¹, merging the supernatural with everyday psychological and social realities. By innovatively embedding vampire conventions within Swedish cinematic traditions of art-house drama and social realism, the motif of the vampire is re-examined, indigenised and transformed into a powerful metaphor for exploring both the emotional lives and relationship between the film's prepubescent protagonists Oskar (Kåre Hedebrant) and Eli (Lina Leandersson), as well as wider social issues of neglect, loneliness and exclusion. Critically acclaimed on both national and international platforms (earning success at Göteborg International Film Festival, Guldbagge Awards and Tribeca Film Festival amongst others), *Let the Right One In* redefines and transcends both traditional gothic and popular teen-orientated interpretations of the vampire genre to reach new levels of emotional depth and social commentary.

The chosen sequence showcases both the film's hybridity and the major tensions in the narrative. Occurring mid-way through the film, this scene marks a crucial development in Oskar and Eli's relationship, beginning with Eli's stated refusal to enter Oskar's home uninvited. Challenged, she proceeds to enter anyway, resulting in a horrific and gory seizure which provokes Oskar to reconsider both his relationship to Eli as well as his own sense of self. Ultimately, the sequence portrays a climactic moment of empathy in which the film's fundamental divisions between boy and vampire, the 'familiar' and 'Other' are overcome. By re-examining various elements of vampire conventions from folklore and blood through to thresholds and transgression, this sequence brings the viewer ever closer to the complex inner lives of the film's protagonists.

The opening shot of Oskar conveys crucial information about his status, role and psychology. The distance of the medium-long establishing shot not only highlights Oskar's isolated figure, but also draws attention to elements of the domestic mise-en-scène which, as Corrigan states, can 'define and reflect' the inner life of its characters². Oskar's sense of confinement and neglect is implied in the composition of the shot, as the walls in the foreground either side of Oskar's figure entrap him, thus visually reflecting the sense of confinement that Bruhn et al. perceive in the film narrative whereby, 'critical aspects of human life [are] locked away between the (cold) walls of Blackeberg'³. The composition of the shot thus confirms Oskar's alienated status in the film.

In addition, the set and lighting contributes to an environment of neglect and family breakdown. The lack of warmth and colour in both the pale white walls and the cold lighting ensure that Oskar's domestic space participates in the list of 'socially atomised and empty' environments that Gelder identifies in the film⁴. The domestic interior mirrors the barren and sterile Stockholm exterior, as

¹ Rochelle Wright, 'Vampire in the Stockholm suburbs: *Let the Right One In* and genre hybridity', *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 1: 1, (2010) pp. 68

² Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, 'The Film Experience: An Introduction', Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's (2004) pp. 110

³ Jørgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik & Henriette Thune, 'Parallel Worlds of Possible Meetings in *Let The Right One In*', *Word & Image*, 27:1 (2011) pp. 11

⁴ Ken Gelder, 'Our Vampires, Our Neighbours', *New Vampire Cinema*, BFI (2012) pp. 9

Oskar's home is visually suggested to be equally cold and lifeless as the snow and ice that exists beyond its walls. The appeal of such an environment in Swedish drama is clear, given recent fascination with family disintegration and neglected children in recent Swedish film, as well as the prominence of troubled children and young people's problems in national media⁵. Indeed, the duration of this static shot (lasting 13 seconds) suggests Alfredson's clear desire for the viewer to reflect on this internal space, and to visually associate it with these notions of neglect, as a way of enhancing the audience's understanding of Oskar's loneliness in the film as a whole.

Whilst the diegetic sound of the radio heightens this sense of loneliness, it also adds a degree of familiarity to the scene. On the one hand, the radio lends a layer of artificiality to the otherwise silent scene, functioning as a symbolic substitute for any genuine human contact and also for the communication that is so desperately lacking in Oskar's neglected family life. On the other hand, the distinctively Swedish voice on the radio serves to locate the scene and, as is the case of the film's native audience, to invite the viewer to engage with the everyday, Swedish aspects of Oskar's life, which are crucial to the social realism of the film as a whole. The air of familiarity carried by the monotonous drone of the radio is then subsequently disrupted by the intrusive sound of the electric buzzer, which breaks the calmness of the opening shot, thus signalling the arrival of Eli; the unfamiliar, unknown 'Other'.

Whilst the sequence establishes Oskar's isolated and confined status in the film, the initial over-the-shoulder shot of Eli contributes to her outsider status and sense of exclusion. By framing Leandersson's figure in an off-centre position, the presence of the door in front of her is emphasised, and its symbolic significance as an obstacle is accentuated. Considering the absence of such a shot in the earlier scene where Oskar knocks on Eli's door, it appears as if Alfredson is deliberately seeking to associate Eli with this image of exclusion. Aside from participating in conventional notions of the 'vampire-as-outsider', this association is also loaded with social significance, as Eli is coded as an ethnic outsider throughout the film. It is significant that the role of the vampire is played by the only non-ethnic Swede, bar one exception⁶; a decision which presumably prompted Gelder to view Eli's roles as that of an 'immigrant in the local Swedish framework' of the film⁷. This reading is strengthened by the fact that the camera is placed behind Leandersson, thus highlighting Eli's dark hair, in stark contrast to Oskar's blonde native hair colour. Thus, if Oskar is established as a familiar figure to Swedish viewers, Eli indisputably occupies the role of 'Other' in both the sequence and the film as a whole.

These roles are enhanced by editing, perspective and costume during the character's initial interaction. As the door is opened, the viewer expects a straight-angle shot of Oskar on the other side but instead, there is a deliberately placed cut which transitions into an over-the-shoulder shot of Eli, reversing the perspective to that of Oskar's rather than Eli's. This technique of aligning the viewer's perspective with that of Oskar is typical in the film, as it adds to the familiarity of Oskar, whilst Eli remains to a degree, unfamiliar.

Furthermore, whilst Oskar's costume is recognisably modern and familiar (he wears a standard blue T-shirt with a brown, zipper cardigan), Eli's is antiquated and strange. Whilst her white frock suggests her sense of timelessness (consistent with conventional notions of vampires as immortal and Eli's earlier line that "I'm twelve... but I've been twelve for a long time" at the jungle gym), it also draws further attention to her contrastingly dark, non-native hair. This, combined with her costume's resemblance to rags, may well draw from older Swedish cinematic traditions of the gypsy (*tattare*) figure, or more specifically the 'gypsy urchin' figure in the 1950s⁸. This association builds on earlier references to Eli's smell, accusations of thieving and images of her walking barefoot during the film, to once again emphasises the link between vampire and non-Swedish

⁵ Wright, pp. 58-59

⁶ *ibid*, pp. 59

⁷ Gelder, 12

⁸ Wright, 60

'Other'. Thus, this sequence continues the film's subtle transformation of supernatural conventions into metaphors for ethnic conflict and exclusion, all within the film's social realist framework.

Yet in addition to emphasising differences, the sequence also establishes another key feature in Eli and Oskar's relationship; their bond. As Gelder notes, *Let the Right One In* consistently plays with the 'fragile distinction between intimacy and remoteness'⁹, as the isolation of the protagonists also proves the basis of their unlikely bond. This friendship is suggested by the application of shot/counter-shot editing (a style of editing typically associated with conversation¹⁰), to an interaction with minimal dialogue, as Eli and Oskar appear to engage in a conversation without words. Indeed, Alfredson himself stated his intentions to make the film 'as if it were a silent movie', stressing the importance of image over dialogue in his storytelling¹¹. The lack of dialogue increases the importance of gesture and expression as Leandersson's light smile and Hedebrant's inviting head gesture suggest an unspoken understanding between the protagonists.

Yet this conveyed intimacy meets a definitive and problematic challenge; silent invitation will not suffice in this episode. The first significant line, delivered by Eli ('you have to say "come in"') dictates the fundamental barrier separating the protagonists; as a vampire, Eli is governed by different rules to Oskar. Whilst recalling an obscure element of vampire folklore about the need for invitation before entering a dwelling, the line also re-introduces a vital tension in the plot; the *barrier* separating 'familiar' from 'Other'.

Bruhn et al. refer to this obstacle as the 'threshold', defining it as 'an artistic representation of the problem of engaging in human relationships' and more importantly, 'the challenges of meeting the 'Other''¹². This threshold is depicted visually by Hedebrant's miming hand gesture, which symbolically suggests the presence of an invisible, yet equally impenetrable barrier between them; a non-physical substitute for the earlier image of the door. Whereas the shot/counter-shot editing initially conveyed friendship, it now functions alongside the dialogue to convey a sense of stand-off between the challenging Oskar and reluctant Eli, with alternating reaction shots creating a sense of space and distance between them. Hedebrant's mocking smile and rude beckoning juxtaposes Leandersson's disappointed frown to convey that Oskar still has much to learn about Eli; what is absurd and imaginary to him is very real to her. Thus, the scope of a supernatural convention (the threshold) develops into a deeper comment on the fundamental challenges of their friendship and understanding.

The action of Eli transgressing the threshold is captured by the shift from static to moving camera. As Eli enters Oskar's home, she pauses, and then the camera pans (significantly, for the first time in the sequence) to track her movement as she crosses past Oskar, with both faces appearing momentarily in the same shot to break the sense of space that the shot/counter-shot editing had established between them. This visual sense of trespass is heightened by the extradiegetic wind sounds which accompanies Eli's entrance to generate a sense of suspense and supernatural threat. This is further enhanced by the blocking of the scene, as Leandersson's lowered head and tense body posture creates anticipation as the viewer awaits the consequence of Eli's action. The swift transition between the over-the-shoulder shot of Eli standing and a frontal shot of Oskar's face implicates both characters in the scene, with the focusing shot of Oskar hinting that his reaction is just as important as Eli's imminent seizure.

The transition from a medium over-the-shoulder shot to a close-up shot of Eli's face reflects Oskar's gaze as he focuses on Eli's physical distress in anticipation of her seizure. The build-up of heightened diegetic heartbeat and breathing sounds contribute to a sense of suspense and

⁹ Gelder, 11

¹⁰ Corrigan, 151

¹¹ MovieWeb: 'Let the Right One in - Exclusive: Tomas Alfredson Interview' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-YFEOPprUs>)

¹² Bruhn et al, pp.11

unease, as the pace is quickened in contrast to the previously dominating silence in the sequence. The close-up shot draws attention to Leandersson's facial contortions and the introduction of heightened diegetic bodily convulsions creates an all-consuming sense of distress as both Oskar and indeed the viewer anticipate a dramatic and horrific shock.

Interestingly, the expected shock is delayed and eased as the first shot of blood is out of focus, in another over-the-shoulder shot. By opting to introduce the gore in this way, Alfredson explicitly places the emphasis on Oskar's reaction in the background (which is in-focus), rather than the out-of-focus gore in the foreground. Thus, depth of field is adjusted to suggest an interplay between Eli's physical suffering (foreground) and Oskar's emotional suffering (background), as he is made to witness the suffering that he has inflicted on his friend. The violence is momentarily withheld as the viewer is made to focus on Oskar rather than Eli. This adheres to the emotional emphasis of the film as a whole, and also suggests that it is Oskar who must learn to understand Eli.

However, whilst the viewer is typically distanced from the violence in *Let the Right One In*, the segments that follow deviate from the norm. The extreme close-up shots of Eli's bleeding orifices bring the viewer atypically close to the blood in a way that is more consistent with modern horror and gore cinematic traditions. Alfredson's choice to depict this particular moment of violence at such proximity can be understood in light of Bruhn's notion of a 'transportation of pain perception'¹³, which occurs as Eli's physical pain is transported into emotional pain for Oskar, thus bringing his perspective (and by extension the viewer's) closer to Eli's suffering. Whilst the rapid cuts between Eli's various points of haemorrhage, combined with the sound of oozing blood, convey a horrific, all-encompassing sense of physical infliction and urgency, it is the alternating extreme close-up shots of Eli and Oskar's eyes that convey the scene's emotional depth.

The mirroring effect between Eli and Oskar's eyes convey a clear sense of shared fear, empathy and parallelism. Whilst the protagonists are momentarily locked in each other's gaze, the contrast between Eli's bleeding dark eyes and the clear green of Oskar's is striking; Oskar is unscathed whilst Eli is victimised. The bleeding eye image is symbolic in its resemblance to a tear, reaffirming this sense of Eli's suffering due to Oskar's lack of understanding. Through blood, Oskar is thus brought closer to Eli, and is able to 'look' at her for the first time. The subsequent extreme-close up of Oskar's mouth is followed by immediate dialogue to imply that he has learnt his lesson; a crucial moment in the film. Having witnessed Eli's suffering, he is now prepared to take her perspective seriously and will explicitly state his invitation. The abrupt silence and lack of movement as Oskar holds Eli restores the sequence to a normal pace, concluding this vital step in their relationship. Eli and Oskar have bonded over blood, in a traumatic yet authentic version of the blood pact that Oskar had proposed in an earlier scene.

A sound bridge links the transition from this scene into the next, as Oskar's dialogue in the following scene ("What are you?") becomes synchronised with the closing image of the preceding scene (the extreme-close up shot of Oskar embracing Eli) to convey how Oskar's new-found intimacy for Eli (image) enables him to begin asking questions and to ultimately try to understand her (dialogue). Yet, this mutual understanding and new-found connection between 'familiar' and 'Other' is complicated when Eli responds with "...the same as you", before echoing Oskar's "squeal piggy" monologue from their encounter in the opening stages of the film. Through this echoing of previous dialogue, Alfredson further complicates the viewer's understanding of Eli and Oskar's relationship by inviting him/her to consider Eli as a projection of Oskar's tormented and violent mind.

¹³ Bruhn et al, pp.10

There is clear weight behind this reading as Alfredson himself has claimed that he sees his protagonists as 'the same character' or 'two sides of the same coin'¹⁴. According to Jones, this notion of projection and fantasy is typical of the vampire tradition, as he argues that the genre has been used as a 'vehicle for... projecting outwards repressed desires' from the very beginning¹⁵. The juxtaposing make-up (Eli's still bloodied face and Oskar's pale unstained appearance) reflects Alfredson's intention of depicting 'the vampire as the dark side of the boy'¹⁶ to add to this notion of fantasy. Similarly, the closing conversation is shot in shallow focus, which conjures a surreal and dream-like atmosphere, as if the interaction were occurring in some obscure and non-defined space; in Oskar's mind rather than his home.

The introduction of Johan Söderqvist's soundtrack guides the audience back towards the film's more positive values of empathy and friendship (echoed in Eli's line "be more for a while"). The straight-angle close-up shot of Hedebrant's eyes engages the viewer in his new-found understanding of Eli, with the slow-paced cuts between his eyes and Eli's face conveying peace and relief. Yet, the viewer cannot fully shake of the dark, psychological undercurrents of the closing sequence. The final jump shot of Oskar sitting alone in his home mirrors the initial shot of the sequence, returning to a full cycle: the sequence begins and ends with Oskar's isolated figure. Whilst this reinforces notions that the entire episode has occurred in Oskar's imagination, there is a fundamental difference; the closing shot is a side-angle shot, rather than straight-on angle. Thus, the viewer is left with the sense that something has fundamentally changed in Oskar, that the encounter, whether real or imagined, has changed his transformed him.

All in all, the sequence showcases the various techniques, traditions and cinematic influences that contribute to the unique appeal of *Let the Right One In* as a film. More importantly however, it raises and complicates crucial tensions in both the narrative as a whole and more specifically in Eli and Oskar's relationship. The combination of visuals and dialogue plunge the viewer into deeper psychological waters, as the nature of Eli and Oskar's interaction becomes ever more ambiguous. Have we witnessed a conflict between the 'familiar' and 'Other', or an inner conflict of the 'self'?

Filmography

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¹⁴ Movie Interviews and Trailers: 'Interview of Tomas Alfredsson' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqNo5akbMjo>)

¹⁵ Darryl Jones, 'Vampires. Children of the Night', *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film*, OUP (2002), pp. 85

¹⁶ Movie Interviews and Trailers: 'Interview of Tomas Alfredsson'

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