
 FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Levinas, *Nosferatu*, and the Love as Strong as Death

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Love is not stronger than death. In *Death and Time* (*La Mort et le temps*, 1991) Levinas reminds us that, contrary to how it is often quoted or remembered, *The Song of Solomon* says that love is as strong as death not stronger than it (Levinas 1991, 119). Love does not conquer death, it does not give to loss a sense which makes it bearable. And yet Levinas goes on to describe the claim that love is stronger than death as a 'privileged formula' (Levinas 1991, 120; my translations throughout), suggesting that even if it is not true it is worth saying and believing all the same. He refers to deliberately paradoxical formulations by Vladimir Jankélévitch according to which love, thought, freedom and God are all stronger than death, whilst death is also stronger than all of them (Levinas 1991, 119–20, quoting Jankélévitch 1966, 383, 389). So Levinas suggests that love is stronger than death, death is stronger than love, and each is as strong as the other. There is no triumph of one over the other. Against Heidegger, Levinas insists that the death which concerns me is not my own so much as that of the beloved other. The death of the beloved makes of me a guilty survivor, bereft of the possibility of dialogue with the deceased. But even as I am torn apart in grief, death does not conquer love any more than love conquers death. Death is not pure nothingness; something persists. Love is as strong as death.

If ever there were a film about love and death, and (I want to argue) if ever there were a film fit to speak to Levinas's most pressing concerns, it is F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), the first known film adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.¹ The film

¹ The film acknowledges its debt to Bram Stoker right at the beginning, though Murnau changed locations and names of characters because he did not have the rights to film *Dracula*. Stoker's Davis, Colin (2007) 'Levinas, *Nosferatu*, and the Love as Strong as Death', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 2: pp. 37–48. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n2/davis.pdf>>
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opens in the town of Wisborg, amidst blissful, sunlit scenes depicting the apparently joyful marriage of Hutter and Ellen. On the promise of profit, and despite the foreboding of his wife, Hutter travels into what an intertitle calls 'the country of ghosts', to the Transylvanian castle of Count Orlok, who we soon discover is also the vampire Nosferatu, and who wishes to buy a property in Wisborg. Nosferatu sees a portrait of Ellen and admires her neck; he drinks Hutter's blood but does not kill him. Having concluded the purchase of the property in Wisborg, Nosferatu packs up his coffin and departs. Hutter escapes and travels overland to Wisborg. Nosferatu arrives in Wisborg by sea, on a ship of which the crew are now all dead. He brings the plague with him; and as it relentlessly grips the city, Ellen discovers that the only way to prevent further death is to give herself willingly to Nosferatu, who is now residing in a building directly opposite her own house. If she can make him stay with her until the first cock's crow, he will be destroyed. She sends her husband away, summons Nosferatu, and lets him suck her blood until sunrise. He dies; Hutter returns, but Ellen is also dead. At the same moment, the plague abates.

This summary does no justice to the visual brilliance of the film, its key role in formulating the syntax of the horror genre, or its intriguingly knowing ambiguities. It is the latter which are most relevant in the current context. In particular, the film meditates on the entanglement of the life and death, and the imperious force which links together the living and the (un)dead. This is suggested from the first moments of the film when Hutter offers Ellen a bouquet of flowers as a token of his love. Ellen seems more distressed than pleased, asking her husband why he has destroyed the beautiful flowers. Death has entered this world and tainted love before Hutter even sets foot in the country of ghosts; and from this early point Ellen's love will always be touched by death. The entwining of Eros and Thanatos appears most importantly in the film through the hint of some sort of mysterious bond between Ellen and Nosferatu. This bond seems to be formed on Hutter's second night in Nosferatu's castle, when the vampire appears to be on the point of attacking and perhaps killing his guest. After Nosferatu has entered Hutter's bedroom, the film cuts to Ellen, sleeping far away in Wisborg. She awakens, and in a trance walks along a balustrade outside her room, precariously close to falling. It is as if she is taking upon herself the danger currently facing her husband. She falls, but on the side of life and safety, at least on this occasion. The sequence then cuts back

widow sued, and in 1925 a German court ordered that all prints should be destroyed. A few nevertheless survived.

to Transylvania, where the shot of Nosferatu's shadow projected over the terrified Hutter anticipates the sequence at the end of the film when we will see his shadow falling over Ellen's body in the encounter that will lead to both their deaths. Now, the sequence cuts back and forth between Transylvania and Wisborg. In Wisborg, Ellen is to the right of the screen, and she looks from right to left, holding out her arms as if beseeching Nosferatu not to proceed. Back in Transylvania, Nosferatu is facing his victim to the left of the screen. He looks back over his shoulder, as if to face Ellen, to whom the film cuts once again. The rapid cutting here implies that Nosferatu has seen and heard Ellen, and that he is obeying her wishes. He gives up the attack and leaves Hutter's bedroom. In Wisborg, Ellen passes out, and the doctor declares that she is suffering from 'harmless blood congestion'; the audience is told, however, that 'her soul had heard the call of the death bird'.

The cutting between Nosferatu and Ellen has an effect similar to that of the classic shot/reverse shot technique which links two characters in dialogue with one another. It suggests that an encounter or exchange takes place despite the spatial distance between the couple. Ellen knows what Nosferatu is doing; Nosferatu knows that she knows, and he does what she silently asks. At this moment she saves her husband and perhaps damns herself. The link to Nosferatu cannot now be severed, and it is even implied in the film that Ellen positively anticipates and desires the arrival of the death-bringing vampire. As Hutter and Nosferatu make their way separately towards Wisborg, Ellen senses that someone is approaching, saying 'I have to go to him. He is coming'. It is not clear whether the *he* here is Hutter or Nosferatu, whose approach is also felt by his deranged servant, the estate agent Knock. The possibility that it might be Nosferatu rather than Hutter whose arrival Ellen anticipates is suggested by the fact that she is pictured waiting for whomever it is by the sea. Nosferatu, we know, is coming to Wisborg by ship, whereas Hutter is travelling by land. So visually at least, the film hints that Ellen is waiting for Nosferatu rather than Hutter. Consequently, when Ellen is seen embroidering the words 'Ich liebe Dich' (I love you), it may be an open question to whom she is declaring her love.

Ellen may be receptive to Nosferatu because, as the film clearly suggests, her marriage to Hutter is less than entirely fulfilled. A late scene shows Ellen lying in bed whilst her husband sleeps in a chair, suggesting a lack of sexual union between them. This is confirmed by the book which tells Ellen that the vampire can be destroyed only by 'a sinless maiden', which translates the German 'eine Jungfrau ohne Sünde'. As a

married woman, she should not be a *maiden* at all; she should be a *Frau* (woman or wife), but not a *Jungfrau* (virgin). The obvious implication here is that Ellen's marriage to Hutter has not been consummated. And whereas her husband slept chastely in a chair, when Ellen summons Nosferatu to her bedroom, he feeds off her whilst she lies on the bed, clad in a virginally white night dress. Herzog's 1979 version of *Nosferatu* makes the sexual element of this much more explicit: the vampire touches his victim's breast and genitals whilst sucking her blood, whereas Murnau's character is seen touching only her head and back. But to deny some sort of erotic element in Murnau's version would surely be as blinkered as to overstate it. The ambiguous eroticism of Murnau's film is more subtly stated. As Nosferatu first enters Ellen's bedroom we see the shadow of his hand fall over her breast and clench as if in a fist; it is not easy to say whether Ellen's response is agony or ecstasy. In any case, we do not see or need to see the physical caress.

It is almost too obvious to suggest that the vampire could be a figure of the absolute Other in Levinas's sense. But I will hold on to this suggestion for a moment nonetheless, because it poses some telling questions to Levinas's ethics. How far does my responsibility for the Other go? Am I responsible even for the Vampire? Levinas tells us that we should welcome the Other 'not in the grace of his face but in the nudity and the misery of his flesh' (Levinas 1982, 20). There is certainly no grace in the face of the hideously ugly, repugnant vampire as played by the unmatchable Max Schreck. Nosferatu is at a far remove from the handsome, suavely charming Dracula played by Christopher Lee in the Hammer films. The Levinasian injunction would nevertheless be to love him, to let him suck my blood, irrespective – or even in full acknowledgement – of his physical misery. But then Ellen's sacrifice of herself to Nosferatu is also ambiguous, since it is also part of a ruse to kill him. Here again, I'm not sure how to apply a Levinasian ethical injunction. If the Other commands me not to kill, am I still bound by that commandment when the Other is a vampire? Perhaps Murnau's film knows things about sex and death and the blindspots of ethics that Levinas couldn't quite begin to face.

According to one important reading of the film, the philosophical significance of its insights is in essence Heideggerian. In *The Material Ghost* Gilberto Perez reads *Nosferatu* as a film about death and different ways of responding to it. Heidegger's ideas were, as Perez puts it, 'in the air the film breathed' (Perez 1998, 127). Made five years before the publication of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927), *Nosferatu*

anticipates Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein*. In Ellen's sacrifice Perez sees 'the self embracing, anxiously yet freely, the condition of "being-toward-death"' (Perez 1998, 147). He continues:

As *Nosferatu* the vampire personifies death, so the woman who confronts him, and who defines herself as an individual through this confrontation, may be seen to personify authentic *Dasein*. The wife in *Nosferatu* represents what, in the existential view of life, is the best way of being human at the juncture most defining of human being, the juncture with death. In destroying the vampire she certainly does not conquer death: she knows that in the process she must die herself. Unlike her husband in his journey, she is not the smiling type who would rather not think of death; unlike her husband later and unlike most of the townspeople, she is not the solemn type who would subsume death under the conventions of mortuary composure. Neither detached like the professor nor deathly afraid like the ship's first mate, neither resigned to die like the dutiful captain nor welcoming of death like the mad real-estate agent, she meets death of her own free will but in fear and trembling. She has what Heidegger calls the 'courage of anxiety' in the face of the end. Her peculiar bond with the vampire and her power over this figure of death may be seen to allegorize the orientation toward death peculiar to human being and the power one gains by making one's death one's own (Perez 1998, 147).

In this reading Ellen occupies a stoically, heroically Heideggerian position, confronting and accepting death as the fulfilment of her own being. This is a powerful interpretation; however, the approach to the film I shall sketch in the rest of this article is less Heideggerian in inflection. By turning now to aspects of Levinas's engagement with Heidegger, I shall prepare the ground for a more Levinasian encounter with the film, focused on the problems of love and death and the film's understanding of its own artistic medium.

Levinas's 1948 essay 'Reality and its Shadow' ('La Réalité et son ombre') provides a starting point. I want to suggest two things about the essay: first, that whilst it clearly argues against Sartre and his notion of committed literature, it also implicitly engages with Heidegger, even though he is named only once (and then only through the adjective Heideggerian); and second, that it constitutes a brilliant reading of *Nosferatu*, even though it is not mentioned at all within it, nor for that matter (so far as I know) anywhere else in Levinas's work. 'Reality and its Shadow' is perhaps Levinas's worst essay, and for that reason it may be one of his most interesting texts. It has become a key, problematic point of reference for anyone interested in both Levinas and literature (and by extension film), since Levinas expresses within it a virulent hostility to art, which

later essays temper but never entirely revoke.² Heidegger, as I say, is explicitly mentioned only once, in a reference to ‘Heideggerian “being-in-the-world”’ (Levinas 1994, 129). But Levinas’s essay dates from a period when it was becoming more urgent for him to distance himself from Heidegger’s work; so I would suggest that Heidegger’s ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (‘Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes’), based on a lecture first given in 1935, is an important point of reference in the essay even if Levinas does not explicitly mention it. In ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, Heidegger argues that the work of art is the locus of what he calls ‘the happening of truth’ (Heidegger 1975, 58). Something that is concealed becomes unconcealed. So, in his problematic example of a painting of peasant shoes by Van Gogh, he claims that ‘The art work let us know what shoes are in truth’ (Heidegger 1975, 35).³ In this view, the critic’s role is simple to formulate, even if difficult to achieve in practice: it is to learn to attend to the work of art, to observe or to read truth as it occurs in the painting or poem.

Levinas counters Heidegger’s version of neo-Platonist aesthetics with his own surprisingly orthodox Platonism, according to which art purveys copies of copies rather than truth itself. For Levinas as for Heidegger, something happens in the work of art; but Levinas opposes Heidegger’s enthusiasm for art with severe mistrust. ‘Reality and its Shadow’ portrays art as a vehicle for what Levinas calls ‘the very event of darkening, nightfall, an invasion of shadow’ (Levinas 1994, 126). Rather than a Heideggerian happening of truth, art occasions a fall into darkness. It brings no revelation; on the contrary it confuses and conceals the true nature of things. It is a ‘commerce with the obscure’, describing ‘categories irreducible to those of knowledge’ (Levinas 1994, 126). Objects are de-realised, becoming images and non-objects, dark and ungraspable, occupying a kind of ghost world. Levinas insists that the artist gives to the work ‘a life without life’, ‘[a] derisory life’, ‘a caricature of life’ (Levinas 1994, 139). It is ‘as if death were never death enough’; art places us in an ‘interval’ or ‘between-time [*l’entre temps*]’ in which shadows proliferate and there emerges ‘something inhuman and monstrous’ (Levinas 1994, 143). If art speaks to us at all, it is ‘through enigmas, allusions, suggestion, in equivocation’ (Levinas 1994, 148).

Although Levinas does not mention film here, and certainly not *Nosferatu*, his description brilliantly characterises Murnau’s great work. *Nosferatu* describes familiar,

² On Levinas and literature, see in particular Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*, and Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*.

³ For analysis of problems in the example from Van Gogh, see Derrida, ‘Restitutions de la vérité en peinture’ (Derrida 1978, 291–436).

domestic spaces becoming uncanny, light being invaded by shadow, the known crumbling in face of the unknown. Locations are empty yet haunted, immobile yet seething with dangers which are unseen and unnameable. When Hutter travels into the land of ghosts, he discovers that he can in fact never leave it because it will accompany him now wherever he goes. Nosferatu himself epitomises this eerie world of shadows, liminal spaces, and the walking dead. He is, in Levinas's words, 'inhuman and monstrous', yet also sometimes strangely human, yearning, alone and frail, both the same as us and unspeakably alien. He appears as vulnerably human and monstrously inhuman, natural and supernatural, material and immaterial. At some moments he is physically awkward, as if trapped in a body unfamiliar to him; at other moments doors are opened for him by unseen hands, or he rises from his coffin or walks through walls as if he were a spirit. He inhabits an intermediary space in which everything is neither one thing nor its opposite. He is neither dead nor alive, epitomising Levinas's suggestion that 'death [is] never death enough'. Even Levinas's characterisation of the writer as 'bloodless and awkward [*exsangue et maladroit*]' (Levinas 1994, 148) describes Nosferatu with impressive accuracy. The vampire walks without grace, clumsily, as if he does not belong in our world; and he craves the blood of others to feed his hunger and to maintain his place, or his no-place, in the shadow world between the living and the dead.

My point here is that *Nosferatu* perfectly justifies Levinas's analysis of art in 'Reality and its Shadow'. One aspect of the greatness of *Nosferatu* is its insight into the medium of film: its knowledge that film de-realises the familiar, transforms the known world into a site of absence and phantoms, and occupies a disturbing place between life and death. However, the film's remarkable understanding of its own medium is not enough to redeem art in Levinas's eyes. The role of Heidegger's critic was to learn to attend to the happening of truth in art. Levinas's critic is more like a vampire hunter, rooting out ambiguity in order to destroy it and to overcome the event of obscuring, the invasion of shadow, with which art threatens us. The critic must interpret art in order to wrest from it the philosophical truth hidden in the non-truth of the work. This is an active intervention rather than the receptive stance of Heideggerian listening. The artist is close to madness; the critic restores sanity by tearing the work from its irresponsibility and making it speak in intelligible, conceptual terms: 'The interpretation of criticism speaks in full possession of itself [*en pleine possession de soi*], frankly, through the concept which

is as it were the muscle of the mind' (Levinas 1994, 148). Heideggerian awe in the face of art has been replaced by an attitude of suspicion bordering on hostility.

What to my mind is most striking about this defence of the role of criticism is the extent to which it relies on values which are the very opposite of what we might normally associate with Levinas. Criticism is said to be more responsible than art because it is 'in full possession of itself', whereas the Levinasian subject of *Totality and Infinity* (*Totalité et infini*, 1961) discovers its responsibility as it is *robbed* of its self-possession by its encounter with the other; in the terms of *Otherwise than Being* (*Autrement qu'être*, 1974), rather than autonomous and self-sufficient it is obsessed, a hostage or a substitute for its neighbour. And Levinas's insistence on the primacy of the concept in 'Reality and its Shadow' fits oddly, to say the least, with his account of concepts as violent and limiting, a restriction to thought rather than its ideal medium; and it does not correspond either to his concern to hear what escapes the concept, to listen for the *saying* that is not fully contained in the *said*. In this anxious and transitional text, the repudiation of art in its Heideggerian understanding has led Levinas into positions that are remarkably and curiously un-Levinasian.

This is of course not the end of Levinas's engagement with Heidegger. I want now to pick up the dialogue nearly thirty years later when, in his final year of regular teaching from 1975 to 1976, Levinas turned again explicitly to Heidegger to develop his account of death in *Death and Time*. Levinas's repudiation of Heidegger can, in turn, prompt a reassessment of the Heideggerian reading of *Nosferatu* to which I referred earlier. In his detailed discussion of the sections on death in *Being and Time*, Levinas's principal disagreement with Heidegger concerns the significance of the death of the other. Heidegger argues that we do not experience the death of the other. We may mourn, revere and care for the dead, and we may feel loss; but the loss we experience is not the same as the loss of being experienced by the deceased. Moreover, the dead have left us and our world forever, and there is no sense in which they are still with us (Heidegger 1979, 238). Heidegger argues that the only death that concerns me authentically is my own, and that everyone must die their own death. I can die *in the other's place*, for example by sacrificing myself to save her; but I cannot die her death for her (Heidegger 1979, 240). Indeed my death is what is most authentically my own, that which is, as Heidegger puts it, 'most mine [*eigenstf*]'. Through death Dasein overcomes its distance from itself, completes itself and makes itself fully its own. The death of others may be a distraction from my being-towards-death because it serves to reassure me that

I am still alive (Heidegger 1979, 254). Dasein may be moved by the death of others, but it is not authentically touched by it in its being.

On this point, Levinas is irreconcilable with Heidegger. For Levinas the death of the beloved is a defining trauma which makes of me a survivor, grieving and desperate to restore the now-excluded possibility of dialogue with the other. The difference between Heidegger and Levinas is in part one of perspective: Heidegger focuses on my death, whereas Levinas is concerned with the death of the other whom I survive. For Heidegger, what concerns me authentically is the demise which I know awaits me as a fulfilment of my being-towards-death; for Levinas the death of the other changes me fundamentally. Heidegger's dead have left our world for good; Levinas's dead are still part of it because they constitute me as a surviving, traumatised subject. Levinas picks out in particular two elements of Heidegger's vocabulary: *Gewissheit* (certainty) and *eigentlich* (authentic, or that which is my own). Dasein's death is certain, characterised by a certainty which has no need of empirical justification; and it belongs fully and only to itself. The language through which Levinas approaches the problem of death revolves instead around ambiguity, excess, restlessness, scandal, exception, unanswered questions, madness, otherness (of course), as well as the negation of sense and knowledge. One way of putting this is to say that the moment of the other's death is when we discover whether we are Heideggerians or Levinasians: is our being untouched by the other's death, or shocked into a new subjectivity?

For Levinas, love does not defeat death because the loss of the loved one is real, irreversible, and unbearable; but neither is death the annihilation of love because the dead beloved makes of me the haunted survivor I must now become. So love is as strong as death, undefeated but also unable to triumph. This brings us back to *Nosferatu* and its unsettling meditation on the relation, which I am inclined to call the love, between the death-bound Ellen and the undead vampire. Perez's Heideggerian reading of the film, to which I referred earlier, describes it as 'an allegory of the self thrown into a world where death impends' (Perez 1998, 127). Ellen is *Nosferatu*'s 'opponent' and 'destroyer' (Perez 1998, 146): an enemy rather than (also) a lover. Perez downplays the sexuality of the final encounter, seeing in it a 'metaphor' for the self's embracing of being-toward-death (Perez 1998, 147). The fundamental narrative of the film is of how Ellen becomes 'a figure of existentially authentic human being' (Perez 1998, 147). This reading reproduces the Heideggerian model according to which the death that concerns me is my own; it fails to see the extent to which Ellen's actions are also bound up with her

relation to the dead or undead other. Whatever the nature of the bond between them, there is certainly something which ties together Ellen and Nosferatu, even if they never physically meet until the film's conclusion when they both die. Their relation is absurd, unfounded, nonsensical, suicidal even; but in its unfathomable excess, it may precisely illustrate Levinas's disagreement with Heidegger: I am constituted by the death of the other in ways that I could never have anticipated, and which extend beyond my understanding. The death which concerns Ellen is not just her own, it is also Nosferatu's – the death which has already happened and which is yet still to happen, and which, as an act of love, she brings about at the same time as she hastens her own.

This is not to say that *Nosferatu* is merely a Levinasian allegory. It may to some extent invite and welcome a Levinasian reading, but it also has insights which are not to be found in Levinas's work. In Murnau's film, there is no sequential narrative of encounter and loss. Rather, it is as if the fatal encounter has already taken place, loss has already occurred, before the contingencies of actual events. The subject is possessed by death before the trauma of real bereavement. The film bears a sense that everything significant has already been decided before anything has actually happened. As Hutter rushes to work at the beginning of the film, he is told not to hurry because 'Nobody can escape his destiny'. Everything is already settled. In fact, the film's narrative only makes sense if characters know in advance what awaits them, and what they must do. There is no surprise or need for choice. Ellen's affinity with death is presaged by her lament over the dead flowers in the opening sequence; indeed, in the opening sequence she seems to be dressed in black, as if she were already mourning a death, perhaps her own. The estate agent's desire to sell to Nosferatu the building opposite Ellen and Hutter's house is explained if he can already envisage the vampire's yearning for Ellen; Nosferatu is bound to Ellen long before he sees her in person, and Ellen waits by the sea as if she knows the route he is taking to come to her. Most importantly, both characters must know that their encounter at the end of the film will lead to their deaths, so that their own death becomes not so much an unfortunate consequence of their encounter as its true object, the enactment of a destiny that both have foreseen. Nosferatu is not lured into staying too long in Ellen's bed chamber; rather, he allows himself to remain in fulfilment of a tacit pact which ensures that both he and Ellen will die. This film, I find myself wanting to say, knows more than Levinas or Heidegger about love and death and their obscure entanglements; and it knows that the subject is haunted, inhabited by its own death and the death of others, before any

encounter has taken place, before I have even met the one I will love and lose and grieve, or with whom I will choose to die.

Without ever referring to *Nosferatu*, Levinas provides resources for encountering the strange beauty of Murnau's film. In 'Reality and its Shadow' he describes with great insight the film's ghost world, the intermingling of life and death, the darkness and absence that sap our sense of the real, the true and the material; but he resists its charm by insisting instead on self-possession and conceptual security. In *Death and Time*, in order to refute Heidegger he insists on excess, love that is not destroyed in death, the commerce with the unknown. Silently, he abjures the knowledge and self-possession of 'Reality and its Shadow', and re-opens a position from which he might after all have been able to appreciate Murnau's great film. *Nosferatu* understands with astonishing perspicuity that film is a haunted medium where ghosts roam, and where the dead walk amongst the living. Levinas's book on death is an earnest attempt to keep the dead with us, still capable of something like a response despite their demise, still speaking to us within our fractured selves. *Nosferatu* also portrays haunted subjects, though here they do not know by whom or by what they are haunted. They mourn for something lost before and beyond any empirical encounter. Letting us glimpse again the transient and the mortal, the film holds unresolved, poignantly unknown, which of love and death is the stronger.

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