

**Hello Stranger!?: The Vampiric Re-Finding of the Projected Self in *Let the Right One In* by Tomas Alfredson (2009)**  
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Eli gave a thin smile. ‘You want to see? What happens? Do you? Is that what you want? [...] She was bleeding out of all the pores in her body. Oskar caught his breath, shouted: ‘You can come in, you can [...] you are welcome, you are [...] allowed to be here!’<sup>1</sup>

This paper concentrates on the ways in which Jacques Derrida’s notion of hospitality can be configured in relation to the figure of the vampire, and more particular to that of Eli in the film *Let The Right One In* by Tomas Alfredson. Here the necessary invitation of the *revenant* over the threshold is central to the narrative and eventual dénouement of the film. Further to this I want to suggest that Jacques Derrida’s notion of the Host and Guest can find a direct correlation in Kleinian object relations and the internalisation of ‘good’ objects and the projection of ‘bad’ objects that is necessary in the construction of the self. In this framework the ‘inviting in’ of the vampire can be seen as a call for individual reparation and re-integration, through which the impossibility of absolute hospitality might find its enunciative expression.

Traditionally the vampire of folklore has relied upon the continued affections of its nearest and dearest, but once it made the transition from peasant superstition to romantic literature it was the kindness of strangers on which it relied, an unconditional invitation over the threshold of its next victim. The intimacy of the subsequent visitation, as seen in *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu and *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, exemplifies just how much vampires do in fact love their food.<sup>2</sup> However, like the earlier folkloric tradition of dead people who ‘not only refuse to remain dead but return to bring death to their friends and neighbours’, the role of the vampire is to confuse the natural borders between what is considered as friend or foe.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously – being both familiar but foreign – they confound the normative distinctions between Self and Other and also Host and Guest, so that they are no longer differentiated and discrete but permeable and interchangeable. The film *Let The Right One In* demonstrates this porosity perfectly, for the vampire Eli is the epitome of the familiar and safe, seemingly being a defenceless pre-pubescent child, but is also the dangerous and destructive Other.

Before progressing I want to consider Derrida’s writings on the notion of hospitality.<sup>4</sup> Derrida sees hospitality as essentially a social bond between what he identifies as the Host and the Guest, where the former is collectively inclusive – those that are part of the social collective, and the latter exclusive – those that are not. Socrates provides his prime example of this as being one who configures both of these positions, simultaneously at home and under the rule of law of Athenian society, but also a stranger as a separate and foreign Other.<sup>5</sup> Here, as described by Mark Westmoreland, ‘the foreigner was essential because he provided that to which citizens could compare themselves’.<sup>6</sup> In this framework the Guest is expected to comply with the strictures or the law of the Host to gain acceptance and entry to what is seen as the ‘home’-land. Such hospitality is founded upon a conditional exchange, one that is implicitly violent through the fact that it is unequally weighted but also through the fact that it is never fully open and thus enforces the social practices of the dominant authority. From this Derrida posits the possibility of an ‘absolute’ hospitality which would always be open and enunciative. He also realises that such an ‘absolute’ in current Western ideology is founded upon an ethical impossibility and that its inability to ever be fully realised produces an aporia: ‘the concept of hospitality appears as a paradoxical law, pervertable and perverting. It seems to dictate that absolute hospitality should break with the law of hospitality as a right or duty’.<sup>7</sup>

Absolute hospitality then can only be made manifest by going beyond the hegemonic proscriptions that create its definition in the first place; it must go beyond itself to no longer be just about ‘the limit of the threshold’ as described by Leonard Lawler<sup>8</sup> but to express what Emmanuel Lévinas calls: ‘the concrete and initial fact of human recollection and separation’.<sup>9</sup> Hospitality then becomes an essentially ethical positioning where the Host and Guest become inextricably linked in an interdependence of identity and responsibility, or in Derrida’s words: ‘so it is indeed

the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage [...] and the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host'.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, absolute hospitality becomes dependant upon the willing self-sacrifice of the Host to the Guest, or the Self to the Other. This, I suggest, finds its equivalence in the vampiric stranger but the true nature of the intimate connection between the human host and the undead guest is most fully explained and articulated by a consideration of Kleinian object relations where our most fundamental constructions of self are dependant upon our relationship to external objects. It is to this that I now turn.

The psychoanalyst Melanie Klein sees the infant's primary relationship as being with the mother but more particularly with the breast. She writes: 'The mother's breast [is] the first and fundamental object', but it is one that has inherently both "good" and "bad" aspects".<sup>11</sup> As Dorothy Dinnerstein proposes, the breast becomes the infant's 'ultimate distress as well as ultimate joy'.<sup>12</sup> When withheld it becomes the absolute focus of the child's frustration and destructive impulses, so much so that, as Juliet Mitchell writes:

It fears that the object on which it vents its rage (e.g. the breast that goes away and frustrates it) will retaliate [...] in self-protection it splits itself and the object into a good part and a bad part and projects all its badness into the outside world so that the hated breast becomes the hateful and hating breast.<sup>13</sup>

However, the externalisation of the 'bad' object does not alleviate this distress but rather creates further anxiety. As noted by Isaac Balbus, the infant, in striving to 'keep its connection to a loving and lovable "object" [leads to] the creation of a terrifying, hostile "object" against which it must defend'.<sup>14</sup> Once outside the child's psyche, and so beyond its control, the 'evil' breast is seen as intent upon a course of revenge and retaliation which mirrors the destructive urges initially felt by the infant. This sets up a tension of aggression between the child or self and the projected object, so much so that the externalised part is seen as foreign or other. As Glen Gabbard, Judith Beck, and Jeremy Holmes suggest in splitting or projection the 'object or self representations that are split off may be placed in others as a way of disavowing them'.<sup>15</sup> This 'disavowal' is an act of violence, which though originally directed against unacceptable parts of the self, those which hated the 'good' breast, become focused upon the purposively unrecognised self made manifest in the figure of the 'not-self' or Other; more specifically, the unrecognised Other finds its most potent expression in the body of the stranger. In this configuration of projection we have equivalence but also a mirroring of Derrida's hospitality. This is seen in that the host configures its identity in direct opposition to the guest or stranger but rather than enacting violence upon them to fulfil the social contract predicated by the 'law', the violence comes in the forcible ejection and rejection of the guest. However, Klein, unlike Derrida, does not see this resulting in an aporia but posits a way beyond this which acts like absolute hospitality in that it too is an open and enunciative state. Klein sees this in the act of reparation which involves both recognition and re-integration. To example how this might work in terms of the vampiric guest. *Let the Right One In* embodies both projection and a reparative hospitality.

*Let The Right One In* by Tomas Alfredson is set in 1980s Sweden on a drab estate called Blackeberg. Here Oskar lives with his mother, while his estranged father lives alone far away from the town. Interestingly this sets up a corollary with 1980s American teen-vamp films where the trope of the single parent family is central to the ensuing narrative and its resolution. Films such as *Fright Night* (1985), *The Lost Boys* (1987), and *Near Dark* (1987), among others, all see the main teenage male protagonist on the cusp of manhood. Here Oskar is far from such a transition, though he does share the extreme emotions of frustration and trauma that in these earlier films brought forth or rather made manifest the figure of the vampire. It is the violent feelings that Oskar has for the boys that bully him at school and his inability to contain these emotions that brings forth Eli. It is not until we see Oskar acting out his fantasy of stabbing his tormentors, in this instance by stabbing a tree, that the seemingly harmless twelve-year old girl Eli arrives to live in the same block of apartments as Oskar. I would suggest that she embodies the externalisation of his 'bad' objects, the rage that would otherwise contaminate his 'good' self. Fred C. Alford writes 'the child attempts to defend against the dangers of bad objects by keeping images of them separate and

isolated from the self and good objects'.<sup>16</sup> That this is the case is revealed in various ways: first, Eli acts out Oskar's own extreme desires regarding violence and death which is made evident in his fascination with the murders that Hakan, Eli's protector, has perpetrated in order to supply Eli with the blood necessary for survival; secondly, Oskar is shown to want control over his own estranged father but he actually has very little, whereas Eli positively dominates her own 'father' Hakan. Possibly the most convincing detail though is the mirroring of Oskar and Eli in that they are in fact both either symbolically or physically castrated boys. Oskar is emasculated by the bullies at school and Eli, which is in fact short for Elias, was castrated by his Sire when originally 'turned' two hundred years previously. A further point of similarity and effect of this is that both are fixed at that point of originating trauma; Oskar is unable to mature into puberty because of the bullying and Eli will remain the same age forever. This mirroring of one character onto and into the other then configures Eli as an externalised part of Oskar and so allows for a comparison with Derrida's notion of hospitality where Oskar can be seen as the Host and Eli as being the stranger or guest. This subsequently creates fundamental bond of interdependent signification between them where Eli's actions are both a product and a producer of Oskar's inner turmoil. This sense of interdependence grows throughout the film, though never in an overtly sexualised way; it is one of increasing integration of the previously differentiated self.

One scene in particular directly explores this intimate connection between Host and Guest, and the schizoid self. This is when Oskar refuses to invite Eli into his mother's apartment. Although Eli had previously entered through Oskar's bedroom window s/he must be invited across each new threshold to enter the sacred space of the Host. Oskar opens the door but mischievously or as a test does not invite Eli in. This enacts Derrida's sovereignty and violence of the Host by forcing the Guest to obey the laws of hospitality. That this is so is seen when Eli enters, for blood begins to issue from her/his eyes, nose, and ears. The only way that this can be stopped is to truly recognise the Guest as an extension or externalisation of the self; Oskar sees Eli as a physical manifestation of his own projected psyche. However, more is required than mere recognition, for this would only realise the sovereignty of the Host or the aspect of hospitality that is centred upon the responding 'I'. As Derrida writes: 'The answering always supposes the Other in a relation to self'.<sup>17</sup> This would necessarily enact further violence, through subjugation, upon the Guest. I would suggest, however, that something more interesting is going on here and it is not subjectively inflicted violence but mutual and reparative sacrifice. By knowingly entering uninvited into the presence of the law Eli purposively sacrifices her/himself to the Host and by unconditionally inviting Eli in Oskar sacrifices himself to the Guest. As such this both embodies and extends Lévinas's notion, from *Totality and Infinity*, where 'the subject is hostage', and which Derrida further sees as one of necessary self subjugation where 'the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host'.<sup>18</sup> For in *Let The Right One In* the sacrifice becomes mutual and equivalent which positions it beyond the monadic 'I' into a becoming that is constructed through the loss of the self. Eli and Oskar, in unconditionally sacrificing themselves to each other, perform not just a reparative act of mutual recognition but one of potentialised reintegration. In accepting each other as separate but integral to their individual identities they open up the possibility of becoming more than their differentiated selves would allow, to the possibility of a self beyond trauma.

In conclusion, Oskar and Eli's relationship operates on many disparate but I would suggest similar levels. For it can be seen to enact the projection of the 'bad' self beyond the body but also demonstrate the fundamental laws of collective and individual identity. Further, it reveals ways beyond the stultifying strictures of inclusion and exclusion and the inherent violence of the I/Other binary. Jelisaveta Blagojevic writes:

Such relation between I and the other would have to, paradoxically, contain in itself inclusion and exclusion, transcendence and belonging, absolute eternal appearance of somebody and something unknown and strange as well as intimacy of the familiar and close, in other words, distance and intimacy at the same time [emphasis in original].<sup>19</sup>

Eli represents the absolute otherness that Oskar cannot contain and by inviting her/him in he 'welcome[s] the infinite' which Derrida sees as 'the first hospitality, beyond the capacity of the I'.<sup>20</sup>

This enacts both recognition of the self/host in the externalised other/guest/stranger but also the desire towards reparation and re-integration. Such willing reciprocal sacrifice to the infinite within both dissolves the borders between them and constitutes what Homi Bhabba calls an ‘abyssal overlapping [...] where the spatial dimension of contiguity is reiterated in the temporality of the indeterminate’.<sup>21</sup> This indeterminacy is not so much a re-embracing of what was once lost or joined together, as Freud would suggest with ‘re-finding’, but is a potentialised re-integration where no terms are fixed and self/host and other/guest are held in an enunciative tension which never resolves.<sup>22</sup> This is shown in the film’s closing scenes where the school bullies are threatening to drown Oskar in the local swimming pool. Rather than repeating his usual ineffectual response to such antagonism Oskar releases – or ‘invites’ – his ‘bad’ self, Eli, in to tear the perpetrators to pieces.<sup>23</sup> Signalling the mutual acceptance and recognition of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ parts of the self but also opening up the space of enunciative tension between them where the self is other and the other is self, simultaneously held between integration and differentiation. The film ends with Oskar sitting alone in a train carriage travelling to an unknown destination. The compartment is filled with light suggesting an otherworldly space outside of time. In front of Oskar is a large box from which we hear scratching noises, the Morse code that Eli and he used to communicate earlier in the film. Oskar gently scratches his reply on the top of the box. In not seeing but hearing Eli we know that s/he is forever there with Oskar and in not seeing but hearing Eli we know that they are ever evolving parts of the same but separate self.

## NOTES

1. John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let The Right One In*, tr. by Ebba Segerberg, London: Quercus, 2009, pp. 380–381.
2. Sheridan Le Fanu (1872), *Carmilla* <[http://www.sff.net/people/doylemacdonald/l\\_carmil.htm](http://www.sff.net/people/doylemacdonald/l_carmil.htm)> [accessed 1 June 2010]. Bram Stoker (1897), *Dracula*, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.
3. Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality*; Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988, p. 2.
4. Jacques Derrida (1994), *Politics of Friendship*, tr. by George Collins, New York and London: Verso, 1997.
5. Mark W. Westmoreland, 'Interruptions: Derrida and Hospitality' in *Kritke*, 2008, p. 2.
6. Westmoreland, 'Interruptions: Derrida and Hospitality', p. 2.
7. Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond*, tr. by Rachel Bowlby, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 125.
8. Leonard Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology*; Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002, p. 213.
9. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*; tr. by Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 172.
10. Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*; p. 125.
11. Melanie Klein, 'Some Reflections on "The Orestia"' in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946–1963*, ed. by M. Masud and R. Khan, London: The Hogarth Press, 1963, p. 2.
12. Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*; New York: Harper & Row, 1976, pp. 95–105.
13. Juliet Mitchell, *The Selected Melanie Klein*, New York: Free Press, 1986, p. 20.
14. Isaac D. Balbus, 'De-Kleining Feminist Mothering Theory', in *Theory and Society*, vol.1, No. 6, 1992, p. 820.
15. Glen Gabbard and others, *Oxford Book of Psychotherapy*; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 6.
16. Fred C. Alford, 'Melanie Klein and the "Orestia Complex": Love, Hate, and the Tragic Worldview', in *Cultural Critique*, No.15, 1990, p. 172.
17. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 250.
18. Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*; p. 125.
19. Jelisaveta Blagojevic, 'I Think, Therefore I Think the Other: Derrida's Poetics of Hospitality', in *Journal for Politics, Gender, and Culture*, vol. 3:2, 2004, p. 227.
20. Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*; p. 387.
21. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 267.
22. Sigmund Freud, 'Screen Memories', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 1899, vol. 3, New York, Basic Books, 1960, pp. 47–69.
23. This also explains why Eli is not seen to be invited into the swimming baths, unlike the earlier scene in the hospital, for once recognised as a part of Oskar he can enter any space where Oskar is already inside.