Lurking in the blind space: 
*Vampyr* and the multilinguals

**ABSTRACT**
Carl Th. Dreyer’s *Vampyr* (1932) has been praised as an avant-garde masterpiece that creates a sense of horror by strategically denying the spectator visual access to key turning points in the plot, including most notably the gruesome vampire attacks. Previous scholarship has treated the visual impediments in the film as deriving primarily from a conscious aesthetic strategy on Dreyer’s part to enhance the sense of mystery and terror by undermining the spectator’s gaze. This article links the visual obfuscation in the film instead to *Vampyr’s* status as a post-synchronized, multilingual sound film, which motivated Dreyer to deny the spectator a view of the actors’ moving lips. I argue that Dreyer turned a production limitation into an artistic virtue by discursively framing the denial of vision as an overall aesthetic strategy, thus effectively ‘masking’ what could otherwise have been viewed as an embarrassing concession to financial constraints.

**KEYWORDS**
Carl Th. Dreyer  
*Vampyr*  
sound film  
multilingual film  
auteur cinema  
cultural adaptation  
linguistic adaptation

Carl Th. Dreyer’s 1932 sound film *Vampyr* is a daunting text in many ways. Admitting at the outset that *Vampyr* is a ‘hard’ film, as David Bordwell notes, is not ‘a confession of Philistinism but a basic aesthetic datum which the critic must confront and examine’ (1981: 93).¹ The opacity of the narrative has become a major focus of the critical literature on the film in recent years. A

¹ For a further discussion of the many difficulties that *Vampyr* presents the viewer, see also Rudkin (2005: 25–29) and Koerber (2008). Rudkin summarizes...
the difficulties as stemming from the ‘poor sound quality’, ‘variable quality of the acting’, ‘overall sense of technical inadequacy’, and the lack of any authoritative version of the film, which he attributes in part to Dreyer’s decision to produce three different language versions (2005: 25–27).

Koerber, who produced a restored version of Vampyr, released in 2008 as a Criterion Collection DVD in the United States, similarly focuses on the lack of an authoritative original and the poor and highly variable state of the prints available prior to his restoration.

number of scholars have theorized Dreyer’s narrative strategies by acknowledging the ways in which the protagonist’s as well as the viewer’s desire for knowledge and certainty about what actually occurs is consistently thwarted.

Both Bordwell and, more recently, Alison Peirse have summarized Vampyr’s challenging narrative strategies in terms of a denial of visual access to the most crucial causal events. We are shown reflections, shadows, hints, consequences and echoes of the decisive turning points in the plot, but the events themselves are withheld. Typically, they happen off-screen, often just prior to the protagonist’s (and thus the camera’s) arrival on the scene. Bordwell writes that, ‘at the level of the events themselves, consequences are shown but causes are concealed’, and that ‘[a]n event is presented which, by explicit reference or implicit logic, is seen as a consequence. But the cause is absent’ (1981: 94). The key term for Bordwell is what he calls the ‘absent cause’, which he sees as the decisive structural element of the film.

Peirse has described this phenomenon in a similar fashion, noting that the observations of the protagonist, Allan Gray, are ‘often from behind doors or windows: he is an outsider peering in. He regularly finds himself looking through a frame within a frame, distancing him from the action’ (2008: 163). The haziness that obscures such events as a crucial vampire attack ‘under-mines the spectatorial look, suggesting limitations to the filmic gaze’ (Peirse 2008: 164). Like many horror films, Peirse notes, Vampyr revolves around the ‘blind space’ that exists beyond the frame and the possibility that some malevolent force may be lurking there (Peirse 2008: 161; see also Bonitzer 1981). The key term for Peirse is what she calls ‘the impossibility of vision’, a coinage that has the same implications as Bordwell’s ‘absent cause’: many of the crucial events in the film occur off-screen, prior to the camera’s arrival on the scene or behind visual impediments such as screens, blinds, clothing and architectural features. Thus, although the viewer is yoked to an investigative protagonist who spends the entire film searching his surroundings for clues about the vampire attacks, the filmic gaze ultimately offers no epistemological certainty – only the possibility that what we seek is hiding in the space beyond the boundaries of our visual field.

Curiously, for an argument so focused on causality as Bordwell’s, there is little speculation about the causal factors that may have led Dreyer to make such unusual stylistic choices. Bordwell treats Vampyr’s narrative and visual ambiguities simply as conditions of the filmic text that must be negotiated and dealt with as they exist in the phenomenological present, without investigating the contingencies of the film’s historical context, or the production conditions that may have influenced such stylistic choices. In other words, Bordwell’s ‘absent cause’ argument is one that itself lacks a causal explanation that might account for why Dreyer made the aesthetic choices he did. For Bordwell, the ‘absent cause’ presents Gray (and the viewer) with an uncertainty, which ‘the film works to overcome’ through the intervention of a textual authority that helps Gray to subdue the vampiric contagion (1981: 116). The agency that Bordwell imputes to the film in this quotation is a clear indicator of his formalist perspective at this early point in his career. For Bordwell, the film itself is described as having aesthetic priorities, so the historical circumstances of its production hardly figure at all into his interpretation. Peirse’s reading describes more of the film’s production history than does Bordwell’s, though Peirse mostly attributes the visual obfuscation to the generic strategies of horror films and to the ‘myriad of avant-garde and artistic European influences’, especially Surrealism (2008: 163).
In this article, I will extend and historicize the arguments of scholars like Bordwell and Peirse by examining *Vampyr*’s status as a multilingual film, which I treat not merely as a historical curiosity or an incidental production fact, but as a condition that substantially contributed to the film’s famous refusal of visibility. This denial of visual access is, after all, a highly convenient tactic for Dreyer to use for a film that was to be post-synchronized into three different languages. Without being grounded in a visible reference point, the post-synchronized language is allowed to ‘float’, as it were, in the ‘blind space’ beyond the frame, and thus, in many instances, ‘synchronization’ as it is usually understood is unnecessary. What seems to go unacknowledged is how convenient this denial of visibility is, since Dreyer not only refuses the spectator visual access to key parts of the plot, but also to the lips of the actors as they deliver their lines. Simply put, *Vampyr*’s status as a multilingual film created conditions that incentivized obscuring visual cues and keeping sound sources off-screen. In what follows, I will emphasize not only the pragmatic aspects of the visual obfuscation, but also the ways in which Dreyer integrated this initially purely practical concern into a larger aesthetic project.

**EARLY SOUND FILM AND THE ‘PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE’**

Although *Vampyr* was made during what is generally considered the heyday of multilingual film production (roughly 1929–1933), a closer look at how multiple-language versions (hereafter MLVs) were actually produced reveals just how idiosyncratic this film was. American studios were a dominant player in MLV production and most often used a process that involved reshooting the entire ‘original’ English-language film with actors fluent in another language. The American studios’ motivation for producing MLVs is generally considered to be a purely commercial response to the linguistic barriers suddenly imposed by the advent of sound-synced films. According to film historian Nataša Đurovičová, there was a pervasive sense in the film industry that the ‘newly revealed problem of language would seriously endanger the American cinema’s world markets’, which by 1929 accounted for 35–40 per cent of the studios’ profits (1992: 139). Ginette Vincendeau summarizes the motivation behind Hollywood’s MLV production strategy in a similar manner, writing that

> with the coming of sound, films are no longer automatically exportable. Hollywood studios find themselves obliged to produce films adapted to national markets… in order to satisfy the demand for films in European languages as well as to dodge import quotas imposed by most European countries. (1999: 207)

Since new MLVs could not be easily and cheaply manufactured by simply switching out intertitles (as had been the case with silent film), and since subtitles were viewed as an undesirable remnant of the silent cinema that went against the very nature of sound film – and also posed difficulties to early sound film audiences who were not accustomed to following text and image at the same time – the next best option was simply to reshoot multiple versions of the ‘same’ film.

What is most surprising about this practice, in retrospect, is how inefficient and economically risky such an undertaking was. Subtitling would have
been the cheapest option to make American films communicate to a foreign audience; and although dubbing was significantly more expensive than subtitling (since it required the hiring of foreign language voice actors as well as substantial additional production costs associated with post-synchronizing the sound), it would still have been cheaper than making an entirely new version of the film (see Thompson 1985: 160; Garncarz 1999: 256). The duplications and redundancies of making MLVs included not only a second set of actors, but also potentially a new crew to work with those actors, an entirely new set that was a duplicate of the ‘original’ (if the duplicate film was made abroad, as many MLVs were), and at least double the amount of film stock.

It was not only the emergence of a standardized sound synchronization technology that led to the practice of producing multilinguals, but rather a complex mix of concerns.4 Even before Mussolini’s decree in 1929 that all films shown on Italian cinema screens must have an Italian-language soundtrack, there were backlashes against the encroachment of American films into European markets (see Segrave 1997: 76). As early as the mid-1920s, the dominance of American film was challenged by cultural critics and policy-makers abroad. In 1925, debates between British critics and American studio executives were waged in the pages of *Variety* about the very issue of ‘Americanness’ itself as it was manifested in films imported into European markets. For the British press, the crassness of the American mercantile ethos and commodity culture was so thoroughly embedded in the discourse of American film imports that the films themselves were in conflict with the British national identity. American studio executives countered that the United States was not simply an alternate nation state, but was in fact a kind of post-national culture that contained a mixture of various races and was thus representative of the entire world. Úroviclová labels this claim a ‘Velveeta cheese vision of culture’: a model marked by ‘integration and leveling of differences, followed by a homogenous spread over the entire world’ (1992: 141). It was this model of culture, which perhaps could have been considered more viable in a silent mode of film production, that around 1928 confronted ‘the ancient and unwieldy formation of language, the domain where a nation’s and a subject’s identity lock into each’ (Úroviclová 1992: 141). Sound-synced films were inherently ‘accented’ and linguistically marked in a way that silent films never were, and so the problems of linguistic and cultural difference were suddenly thrown into sharp relief. The claims of American film executives that American films were somehow ‘universal’ in their appeal and relevance were made problematic by the aural presence of American English in the film itself, and thus certain concessions had to be made after 1928 in order to appeal to audiences abroad.

It was not only these concerns about American cultural imperialism that may have contributed to the rise of the multilinguals, but also a preference for hearing the voice of the screen actor once that became part of the cinema audience’s horizon of expectations. Thus, although sound tracks could be post-synchronized with relative ease by 1929 (see Garncarz 1999: 256; Bock 1996: 141), and so voice actors could theoretically be used to ‘make up’ for a screen actor’s linguistic limitations, the voice of the screen actor was generally prioritized (except in countries like Italy, where the state’s interdictions against foreign-language soundtracks created an early acceptance of dubbed sound). That is why, for instance, Emil Jannings, Paramount’s German-speaking star, was reported in 1928 to be in the process of learning English; although his lines in English-language films could have been dubbed in by an American
voice actor, the audience would prefer to hear his voice. This preference for Jannings’s spoken English (no matter how meagre or accented it was) leads Đurovičová to suggest that ‘the economic extravaganza of MLVs may be the result of a specific aesthetic assumption’ about the inseparability of the body and the voice (1992: 143).

The ascendance of MLV production is thus the result of a complex mixture of factors – antagonism abroad towards the ‘Americanness’ of English-language Hollywood films; the perceived audience preference for the voice of the screen actor, rather than that of a voice actor dubbed over the screen actor’s lip movements; and the sense that subtitling was a remnant of the silent film era and thus went against the very ontology of sound film. There was, however, no standard procedure for producing MLVs. Sometimes they were made on the same set as the English-language version with an alternate cast and crew, as was the case with Dracula (Browning, 1931) and Drácula (Melford, 1931): Melford’s version with Spanish-speaking actors was filmed during the nighttime hours (see Lafond 2008). Other times, different versions were made on the same set with more or less the same cast and crew, as was the case with, for instance, Der blaue Engel/The Blue Angel (Sternberg, 1930): both English and German-language versions starred Marlene Dietrich and Emil Jannings and were directed by Josef von Sternberg (see Koch 1986; Petro 2009).

One of the most fascinating strategies for producing multilinguals was Paramount’s staggering investment in the Joinville studios outside Paris. Here, with an annual budget of $10 million, producer Robert Kane oversaw the production of MLVs for Paramount’s large European markets (Đurovičová 1992: 143). Some French language ‘originals’ were produced at Joinville to satisfy French quota regulations, but by and large Paramount produced serial remakes of previously released American films in anywhere between three and fourteen language versions (including such diverse idioms as French, German, Swedish, Polish and Japanese). Sets were copied from the American originals and were manned by mostly American crews, while troupes of actors from various countries re-enacted the English-language original in their own language, generally overseen by a director from their own country. Đurovičová summarizes the overall strategy of MLV production by saying that they followed a ‘hybrid logic, that of a theatrical performance from which all leeway for both rehearsal and improvisation – that is, all threat of inefficiency – has gradually been removed’ (Đurovičová 1992: 144, emphasis added). The conceit underlying MLV production is that an actor’s performance can be repeated with factory-like precision in another language to essentially the same effect. The aesthetic surplus supplied by the skill of the actor is irrelevant in this model – actors are thought to be interchangeable, and thus movie parts are considered easily translatable between any number of linguistic and cultural idioms by the simple substitution of a new speaking body. MLV production (despite the stunning inefficiencies and redundancies built into the production system) was the ideological product of the efficiency model of film-making that prevailed in the burgeoning Hollywood studio system of the time, at least in its functionalist understanding of acting and film-making.

Although the history of MLV production has largely focused on Hollywood’s attempts to adapt and market MLVs abroad, the practice was far from a solely American enterprise. Film historian Joseph Garncarz has written about the success of early German sound film exports, stating that ‘it was not dubbing
or subtitling which enabled the maintenance of film as an export commod-
ity, but the innovative strategy of producing and distributing MLVs’ (1999:
253). During the peak of MLV production, 1929–1931, 66 films (22 per cent of
the 250 feature-length sound films) produced in Germany were shot in more
than one language, chiefly to facilitate export to anglophone and francophone
markets. Among German production companies, Ufa was especially prolific; in
1931, fully half of its output (twelve out of 24 films) were produced as MLVs.
Garncarz notes that MLV production was successful ‘in solving the problem
of the international comprehensibility of sound films’, as indicated ‘by the fact
that Germany’s balance of trade for film showed a profit in 1930 and 1931 for
the first time since accounts had begun to be published in 1924–5’ (1999: 255).

Indeed, although MLV production is often viewed as a historical curiosity
and an ultimately unsuccessful experiment, the practice was not understood by
contemporaries in the early sound era as a strange or inexplicable form; it was
simply the only acceptable means in most parts of the film-viewing world of
adapting sound films for foreign markets. The viability of the various cultural/
linguistic adaptation methods – including most notably subtitling, dubbing, and
MLV production – was determined by the preferences of cinemagoers them-
selves. Although they may seem like acceptable strategies today, subtitling and
dubbing both had difficulty catching on with audiences at the time. For many
spectators who were habituated to reading intertitles in silent films (a prac-
tice that distinctly separated text and image), being required to read subtitles
while simultaneously following the visual action on-screen was not an attrac-
tive option (see Garncarz 1999: 256). Dubbing was technically feasible as early
as 1929 (see Bock 1996: 141), but it did not immediately appeal to viewers, who
‘could not bring themselves to identify the voice of one person with the body
of another in the creation of a new “synthetic person”. It was strange, almost
shocking, to hear a familiar [German] voice coming from a totally unfamiliar
[American] body’ (Garncarz 1999: 257). Thus at this early point in the history of
sound film, when the exportability of sound films across linguistic borders was
still an open question, many audiences showed a strong aversion to the sepa-
ration of the actor’s body and voice that dubbing imposed. Writing in 1930 (the
same year Vampyr was filmed), Siegfried Kracauer found dubbing so disruptive
that he thought it threatened the international ambitions of cinema:

If sound films are to retain the internationality of silent film you must
either move the emphasis from the dialogue back to the pictures, or
onto the sounds as well, or shoot every film in all the main languages
right from the outset. The attempt to pass off Americans as German-
speakers is an absurdity.

(1984: 459)

Thus, at the time Vampyr was produced, many film audiences had still not
accepted sound films with conspicuous dubbing or subtitling. When it came
to cultural and linguistic adaptation strategies, it is no surprise, then, that the
least noticeable and visible ones were often employed, even if they led to such
economically inefficient practices as MLV production.

**VAMPYR AND THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE**

Returning now to Vampyr, we see the many ways in which Dreyer’s film departs
from the ‘typical’ MLV production strategies despite its status as a multilingual
film. However, it is important to note that despite these differences, Dreyer’s strategies were meant, like those used at Joinville, to remove every ‘threat of inefficiency’, as Đurovicová puts it. Although Dreyer was an early adopter of naturalistic acting style, a model that differed profoundly from that which was typical in the more commercially driven MLV production, economic imperatives seem to have been a core concern guiding many of the production choices he made with Vampyr. This perspective departs sharply from Dreyer’s well-known reputation as an impractical and extravagant director whose only concerns were aesthetic.

Vampyr was filmed from April to October 1930 in the French town of Montargis, about 110 km south of Paris. This was Dreyer’s first independently produced feature, made under the auspices of Film-Production Carl Dreyer, the production company he formed in early 1930 in Paris after his acrimonious break with Société Générale de Films. Having acquired a reputation as an expensive and uncompromising director on his previous film, La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc/The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928), Dreyer attempted certain cost-cutting austerity measures with Vampyr, such as filming in cheaply rented ‘found’ locations in the French countryside rather than leasing expensive studio space (Tybjerg 2008: 34). There was, indeed, an overarching economic concern at the heart of Vampyr’s production that seems uncharacteristic for a director known for extravagant set pieces and profligate use of film stock in multiple takes. And while Dreyer’s use of ‘found’ shooting locations could be explained by both economic and aesthetic factors (offering not only inexpensive shooting locales, but also the ineffable ‘authenticity’ of shooting space Dreyer was famous for; see Sandberg 2006), other concessions seem exclusively based on economic imperatives. Foremost among these was casting Baron Nicolas de Gunzburg, an aristocratic Belgian film enthusiast, in the lead role. This was apparently a condition of Gunzburg’s financing of the film, and although Dreyer was fond of working with non-professional actors, the lead roles in his films had generally been handled by professionals.

The most peculiar production condition for Vampyr, however, was its status as a multilingual film, an indication that Dreyer was trying to hedge his bets, as it were, and make sure that the film found a broad enough audience to be profitable. Although Vampyr was shot without sound, the dialogue in the film was post-synchronized in three different languages: English, French and German. There is no record of the English version having been completed, however, and the only extant prints today are the French and German versions (see Rudkin 2005: 28; Swaab 2009: 56). Although Dreyer’s intention to create three different language soundtracks would seem to indicate a relatively progressive stance towards new sound technology, his original plan had in fact been to prepare a fourth, silent version of the film. Dreyer even made it known while filming Vampyr that he would have preferred the film to be silent. Thus the primary reason he opted for post-synchronized sound was apparently economic (Tybjerg 2008: 35).

Even though Vampyr’s multilingual status is probably its most unusual and historically contingent production condition, it is also the aspect of the production about which Dreyer is most conspicuously silent. Effusive in describing the lengths to which his crew went to locate the most authentically dilapidated and aesthetically striking shooting locations, he scarcely mentions the different language versions in his published comments on the film. Dreyer’s silence on the matter could account in part for the general scholarly de-emphasis on its multilingual status. To explain the film’s unconventional mode of storytelling, it seems likely that he would have preferred the film to be silent, and that his decision to adopt a different soundtrack was an afterthought. This perspective departs sharply from Dreyer’s well-known reputation as a director known for extravagant set pieces and profligate use of film stock in multiple takes.
and idiosyncratic visual style, scholars are likely to seize upon the director’s comments about his interest in abstract art (see Peirse 2008: 162). ‘At the time I made *Vampyr*,’ Dreyer recalled in 1967,

> I had been living in Paris for four or five years. In Paris at that time, you couldn’t help but be caught up in the excitement and the imagination which the various artists and movements created, whether ‘cubism,’ ‘dadaism,’ ‘surrealism,’ or what have you. I knew several painters and was very involved in discussions with and about them. So, of course, I was influenced, but by the excitement, the energy, the variety of the work, not by any particular painter or movement. At the time of *Vampyr* I was ‘over head and ears’ in interest in abstract art.

(Drum and Drum 2000: 151)

My point in bringing up this oft-cited causal explanation for *Vampyr*’s visual style is not to contradict Dreyer so much as to point out another unacknowledged influence in Paris at the time, namely Paramount’s prolific output of MLVs produced at Joinville. *Joan of Arc* premiered in Copenhagen on 21 April 1928, the same year that Paramount established its Joinville operation. Sometime between that date and the premiere of *Vampyr* in 1932, Dreyer had come to recognize that silent film was no longer viable:

> There are still some people who think the silent film has a future. John Galsworthy and Thomas Mann, for example, have said that silent films aren’t finished. But there’s no doubt that we must find a compromise and make sound films with clear, polished dialogue. The Americans believe in sound film, and they have a great deal of influence, direct and indirect. Films such as *Potemkin*, *Nibelungen*, and *Joan of Arc* couldn’t be made today.

(Drum and Drum 2000: 144)

What goes unacknowledged (perhaps because it was taken as a given by Dreyer), was that the conceptual category of ‘American sound films’ he refers to encompassed an enormous output of MLVs being produced by Paramount just a few miles away from his home in Paris. So it is not surprising that Dreyer’s instinct when making *Vampyr* was to adopt some of the tactics of Paramount’s multilingual productions – not only would it have seemed an ideal way for his new independently produced film to reach a larger audience and thus rescue his seemingly precarious film career, but it was simply the most geographically proximate example of ‘American sound film production’ available to Dreyer at the time.

If *Vampyr*’s multilingual status is discussed at all in the critical literature today, it is usually in the context of the film’s textual problems, since, strictly speaking, *Vampyr* is actually three films rather than one. Like other MLVs, certain scenes in *Vampyr* were shot more than once for the various versions. But although Dreyer cites American sound film production as an important influence, he did not simply adopt the production techniques of Paramount at Joinville; instead, he seems to have adapted the concept of ‘multilingual sound film’ to the relatively limited economic means available to him. There are in fact quite a few aspects of *Vampyr*’s production that differentiate it from the ‘typical’ MLV film. One is that the same actors were used in all three versions, an achievement made possible not because the performers were polyglot, but through post-synchronization. Most of the voicing was done by separate voice
actors at a Berlin sound studio after the filming in France was complete (Tybjerg 2008: 35). In this we see how Vampyr is both similar to and different from von Sternberg’s The Blue Angel: similar, in that Dreyer used the same cast in all versions of Vampyr, but also crucially different in its use of post-synced sound. Dreyer could thus indulge his preference for non-professional actors without a painstaking search for performers who were fluent in all three languages.

Dreyer’s reliance on a single cast of screen actors (many of them non-professionals), his shooting at cheaply rented ‘found’ locations, and his use of post-synced sound all demonstrate that, like his American film-making counterparts at Joinville, he tried to remove the ‘threat of inefficiency’ from the equation. At a crucial and particularly vulnerable time in the director’s career, Vampyr was made with an economy and efficiency that he is seldom given credit for. Since there was an undeniable economic imperative underlying many of the production choices, it is all the more interesting that critical attention has focused almost exclusively on the film’s avant-garde aesthetics. The tension between these two perspectives should not be viewed as an either/or proposition, i.e. that Dreyer was either an uncompromising aesthete or a budget-conscious pragmatist. Instead, emphasizing the pragmatic economic concerns that informed his production strategies reveals the way these two aspects of film-making intertwined. I am not claiming, of course, that Dreyer had no ambitions to make an aesthetically sophisticated film, just that his economic straits and the production choices he made as a result of those circumstances have not figured prominently enough in critical readings.8 In what follows, I will demonstrate that understanding Dreyer’s economy on the film set helps provide a crucial causal explanation for both Bordwell’s ‘absent cause’ and Peirse’s ‘impossibility of vision’. Dreyer’s ‘denial of vision’ strategy in Vampyr thus emerges as a canny and innovative solution to an economic challenge, rather than deriving solely from generic or aesthetic concerns.

‘THE ABSENT MOUTH’ AND VAMPIR’S VISUAL ECONOMY

Unlike many other MLV films, Vampyr incorporates very little spoken dialogue. The relatively sparse soundscape theoretically allowed for most of the footage to be ‘recycled’ through all three versions. Only a relative handful of

Image 1: A breakdown of the shots in Vampyr (469 total) according to the use of synced speech (31 shots), unsynced speech (35 shots), and no speech at all (403 shots).

8. Rudkin (2005: 27) and Koerber (2008) both make a point of describing the technique Dreyer used of shooting three different versions of each scene in which spoken dialogue is synced to the lips of the actors, but both of them emphasize the problems this technique posed for the post-production sound design and for the consistency of prints across the three languages. Koerber even explicitly states that this technique likely had to do with the production company’s extreme poverty. Neither scholar, however, connects Dreyer’s unorthodox multilingual production methods, and the ‘denial of vision’ it entailed, with the overall style or aesthetic effect of the film.
scenes contain sound that is visibly synced to lip movements and thus needed to be reshot. It may help to quantify this observation. The film as we have it contains 469 shots. Of these, 403 shots (or roughly 86 per cent) contain no audible language whatsoever. Of the remaining 66 shots, fewer than half (31 shots) contain speech that is visibly synced to lips.9

The remaining 35 shots contain audible language that is not visibly synced to lips. The sound may originate from an off-screen source, but more often than not, Dreyer uses innovative framing techniques, camera movements and a visually obstructive mise-en-scène to obscure the mouth of the speaker. These 35 shots will be the focus of this section of the article, since this is where my argument meets that of Bordwell and Peirse. These are the shots in which the unseen source of vocal articulation itself is the ‘absent cause’, and thus the practicalities of making a post-synchronized multilingual film may be seen as the ‘absent cause’ of Vampyr’s visual and narrative style that Bordwell’s discussion does not account for.

Dreyer uses a variety of techniques to obscure the lips of his actors. In the first of these 35 shots (and the first instance of spoken language in the film) the protagonist Allan Gray is shown trying to find the entrance to an inn. After he knocks on the door and several windows, an off-screen female voice asks, ‘Who’s there?’ Gray looks up to detect the source of the query, and the film cuts to an open window low in the frame, where the female innkeeper is revealed as the speaker. Dreyer’s preference for off-screen or otherwise obscured speech sources results in a number of unorthodox editing choices, as in the brief subsequent exchange between Gray and the innkeeper. Having just shown Gray to his room for the night, the innkeeper tells him ‘Good night’, and Gray responds in kind. But rather than filming the exchange so that we see each actor deliver the lines, as we might expect, the scene is cut so that we see the recipient of the greeting rather than the speaker.

9. The data cited here were collected from Martin Koerber’s restoration of the German version of Vampyr, completed in 1998 and released in the United States as a Criterion Collection DVD in 2008 (see Koerber 2008; Swaab 2009). Although there are portions of the original film that are likely still missing in part because of cuts Dreyer made to pass censorship (as both Koerber and Swaab note), Koerber’s restoration is considered the most authoritative version currently available.
Even from the very first scenes, then, vocal articulation is being relegated to the ‘blind space’ the viewer never has access to. We hear the words and deduce their source based on the obvious contextual clues, but we do not actually see the words being spoken. Other off-screen speech sources are used in shots 194 (in which the camera is focused on an empty doorway as the chateau’s manservant, off-screen, tells Gray and Gisele to ‘Hurry!’) and 281 (in which the village doctor tells Leone, ‘I’ll draw your blood’ as the camera...
Benjamin Bigelow

frames his hands preparing his needles for the procedure), to mention just a couple of the many additional examples.

In other shots, the actor’s lips are obscured by the architecture of Vampyr’s ‘found’ shooting locations, as in shot 138, in which we see Gray attempting to intervene and prevent the murder of the old châtelain. His pleas to the servant to hurry are conveniently delivered as he passes through the door, and the impeding doorframe negates the need for a precise sync to Gray’s moving lips. Often the highly mobile camerawork in Vampyr is employed to conceal the lips of the speaker, as in shot 139, in which the servant is shown trying to enter the room where the châtelain has been shot. The servant does not deliver his lines until the camera has panned down away from his face to focus on the deathly grip of the châtelain’s hand on the door handle.

Many verbal exchanges are framed so that the speaking actor faces away from the camera, as in shots 162, 171, 243 and 286. Most of these depict conversations between two characters and are framed so that only the ‘silent’ interlocutor’s face is visible on-screen. The actor whose face is visible

Images 8–11: Many dialogue scenes in Vampyr are shot so that the speaking actor is facing away from the camera. Vampyr (Carl Th. Dreyer, FR/DE, 1932). Image copyright: Danish Film Institute. Used with permission.
often lapses into a silent mode of acting, using gesture and facial expression to communicate rather than speech. This focus on a ‘passive’ interlocutor may in part account for the oft-noted passivity of the protagonist, Allan Gray. Since the visual logic of Vampyr privileges ‘passive’ figures who communicate through gesture and facial expression, by default deemphasizing the active vocal agents, the location of vocalization and the ‘action’ of the story alike are relocated to the ‘blind space’ beyond the spectator’s visual field.

In other shots, lips are obscured by the ubiquitous shadows in and around the old chateau (as in shot 247, in which the manservant and Gray inspect the blood left on the ground by the slain coachman); by the obtrusive architecture (often within the context of eavesdropping situations, such as shot 256, when Gray overhears a conversation between two figures who are never shown on-screen – we see only Gray standing by the closed blinds and listening intently); by other parts of the human body (as in shot 273, when the village doctor’s lip movements are obscured by his bushy moustache); by clothing (as in shot 320, when the manservant says ‘She mustn’t die’ as his mouth is hidden from the viewer by the habit of the nun he is speaking to); and sometimes by multiple layers of visual impediment (as in the final scene of the film, when the village doctor utters alternate pleas and curses as flour falls down on him and eventually suffocates him. In this case, his mouth is obscured by, respectively: his mustache, falling flour, and a steel cage).

Images 12–16: In other dialogue scenes, lips are obscured by shadows, architecture, other parts of the body (such as the village doctor’s bushy mustache), clothing, and sometimes, multiple layers of visual impediment. Vampyr (Carl Th. Dreyer, FR/DE, 1932). Image copyright: Danish Film Institute. Used with permission.
BEHIND THE CLOAK OF THE AVANT-GARDE

To narrate these shots with unsynced speech as isolated images, rather than in their context in the film, gives the false sense that such moments are embarrassingly conspicuous in their attempts to hide the movement of lips. In fact, what is fascinating about the tactic is the effort it takes to notice it and attribute it to the film’s multilingual status. This is because it exists within a constellation of visual withholding tactics – it is not just the source of language that is often withheld, but the source of the vampiric contagion as well. Thus a pragmatic technique allowing for easy post-synchronization appears to be a secondary effect of Dreyer’s primary aesthetic strategy: to hide the vampire so that her attacks will seem all the more mysterious and horrifying. In this way, Dreyer makes such unsynced speech seem motivated by its consistency within an overall strategy of impeded vision. Thus our inability to see the lips of the actors is ‘masked’, as it were, by our more pressing concern: the vampire tormenting the village and haunting the space beyond the screen.

I view the fact that we are not only denied visual access to the source of language, but also to the most crucial events in the story, as Dreyer’s way of ‘masking’ what would otherwise have been a transparent strategy to make the post-synchronization of three different languages easier and more cost-effective. The director has similarly side-stepped economic matters when discussing his motivation or storytelling techniques; in a 1932 interview, he cites his desire to make a radically different film from Joan of Arc:

If I had continued in that genre I would have been called the ‘saint’s director.’ That would have been awful. So I chose Vampyr in order to do something exactly the opposite. The film is a day-dream. I did not have a special purpose, I simply wanted to make a film that was different from all other films. I wanted – if you will – to break a new path for film.

(Drum and Drum 2000: 151)

Dreyer also notes his desire to make a supernatural thriller that would have popular appeal, implying that the visual obfuscation used in Vampyr is a function of its genre:

I have tried to bring forth a sinister mood on the screen. When the Americans want to tell people something frightful, they show drops of blood. There is no blood to be seen in Vampyr but one senses the blood. There is a feeling of blood, the sinister, and mystery emanating from behind the scenes.

(Drum and Drum 2000: 151)

One metaphor that Dreyer uses to explain Vampyr’s intended effect on the viewer, frequently cited in the scholarly literature, demonstrates precisely the way in which he is able to turn a technical limitation – trying to make a multilingual film on a limited budget – into an aesthetic virtue:

Imagine that we are sitting in an ordinary room. Suddenly we realize that a dead body is standing behind the door. In that same moment, the room in which we sit begins to change, and each everyday thing in it looks different, the light and the atmosphere have changed, and
things become what we perceive them to be. This is the effect I want to produce in my film.

(Neergaard 1940: 68)

The effect he has in mind depends precisely upon the fact that the viewer is denied visual access to the source of the horror – it exists beyond the range of vision, only suggested or hinted at within the visual space of the screen. Such para-cinematic discursive interventions by Dreyer are partly responsible for the film’s inclusion in a privileged avant-garde aesthetic category. The denial of vision in Vampyr is attributed not to maladroit visual storytelling, the constraints imposed by economic difficulties or the film’s status as a multilingual, but rather to an artistic intentionality that purposely withheld as much as it revealed. The effect of Vampyr depends, according to the above quote, not on showing, but rather on a strategic hiding – on hinting at a conspicuous ‘blind space’ beyond the visual field of the screen and systematically undermining the camera’s efforts to analyse and make continuous the cinematic space. Those inclined to read Vampyr’s utilization of this ‘blind space’ as indicative of a kind of generic determinism, by virtue of either its inclusion in the conventional horror film genre or by its status as an example of Todorov’s category of the ‘fantastic’ (see Bordwell 1981: 94–95; Nash 1976), must account for the ways in which Dreyer uses a far more ‘withholding’ visual aesthetic than other prominent contemporary examples of supernatural horror films. In James Whale’s Frankenstein (1931), Rouben Mamoulian’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1931) and Tod Browning’s Dracula (1931), for instance, the viewer is generally oriented in a continuous cinematic space and is granted a sense of visual and epistemological security that is consistently denied in Vampyr.

I would argue that this ‘denial of vision’ in Vampyr may be as much a function of the particular production conditions – namely its status as a hybrid and highly unconventional sound film that possesses some features of the typical MLV film, combined with other tactics of visual economy that seem to have conveniently addressed Dreyer’s vulnerable financial position. My attempt is not to denigrate a film that has been rightly praised as a groundbreaking, avant-garde supernatural thriller (see Tybjerg 2008), but rather to suggest how masterful Dreyer was at discursively framing the film so that the potentially embarrassing concessions to economic imperatives have become invisible to the modern viewer. The ultimate sign of Dreyer’s ‘denial of vision’ is thus not evident in the visual obfuscation of the filmic text itself, but rather in the para-filmic discourse generated by Dreyer. By framing the film as a psychologically sensitive supernatural thriller that seeks to disrupt and trouble the viewer’s visual epistemology, Dreyer has ‘masked’ the most basic source of Vampyr’s idiosyncratic visual style: its status as a post-synced multilingual, a relic of the historically contingent production practices of cinema’s transition to sound.

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