

Ellen and Greta on the Deathbed: Representations of Death and Agency in F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922) and E. Elias Merhige's *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000)

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the difference in agency between Ellen Hutter in F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922) and Greta Schroeder in E. Elias Merhige's *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000). The primary focus is on the direction of the gaze and how, for both women, the gaze is the source of transgression. Ellen Hutter dares to look, while Greta Schroeder dares to be looked at and these two transgressions require atonement through death. The manner of their deaths is analyzed as the moment when both women lose all agency and are reduced to objects.

Keywords: *F. W. Murnau; Nosferatu; E. Elias Merhige; Shadow of the Vampire; women and death; woman as object; female transgression; objectification; female agency.*

Edgar Allan Poe wrote, “the death...of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (746) pointing to the fact that the depiction of a dead woman presents an image of purity, one that is unable to shrug off the male gaze, it is completely passive; once dead, she becomes an object rather than a potentially threatening subject. Images of female corpses flourish in literature and film; two examples are found in Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's 1922 vampire film *Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie des Grauens* and E. Elias Merhige's 2000 film *Shadow of the Vampire*. In *Nosferatu*, the woman appears as a transgressor and redeemer, perched on the threshold between a rational, male space and an irrational, female space. Ellen¹, the heroine, displays a degree of agency, located specifically in the gaze and the act of opening windows and books, which disrupts the status quo. Ultimately, her death is as necessary to the restoration of social order as the monster's destruction, because she becomes a central figure in the film and assumes the role of the protagonist instead of her husband. However, sacrifice is a choice Ellen makes; she is the agent of her own death. In *Shadow of the Vampire*, the actress Greta Schroeder also dies, but her death is not the outcome of a series of heroic decisions. Instead, Greta is a victim, subdued by the men around her in the name of art and fed to the vampire. Where Ellen dares to look, Greta desires to be looked at. She appears to be the embodiment of the vamp, a dangerous, seductive woman in control of her own fate, but she has no substance and no agency. Her strength is superficial, a facade. Greta is an object. Considered

¹ The relationship of the characters between these two films and the use of names in this paper requires clarification. Since *Shadow of the Vampire* uses the conceit of being a film about the making of *Nosferatu*, its characters bear the names of real people, such as F. W. Murnau and Max Schreck, but the film fictionalizes its factual source. For the sake of clarity, all discussions in this paper will employ the names of the characters rather than those of the actors. So that, when analyzing *Shadow of the Vampire* all references to Greta Schroeder will be to the *character* portrayed in the film, not the real life actress who played Ellen. With regard to Murnau, it may be assumed that in the latter half of the paper, the name refers to the *fictional* Murnau presented in *Shadow of the Vampire*, rather than the actual director, unless otherwise indicated.

together, these two films appear to present a reversal of agency in the two women, with the more modern version taking power away from its female protagonist. This apparent shift, however, is not a negative reinterpretation of the woman, but rather a product of a change in adversaries. Ellen faces the vampire, an outside force threatening the peaceful society of Wisborg. He is an easily distinguishable threat. Greta, on the other hand, faces a less obvious opponent. In Merhige's film, the true villain is not the somewhat pathetic vampire, but rather the director, Murnau. His artistic vision obscures morality, as well as mortality, and Greta is helpless against the power he exerts over everyone that enters his film set.

In her first scene, Ellen is an object of Hutter's gaze, seen both through and at a window. The objectification is momentary, for in the interaction between the couple that follows, Ellen demonstrates a greater understanding of actions and their consequences than her husband. The association with windows, however, continues throughout the film as she is repeatedly seen through them, looking out of them, and pictured near them. Ellen thus perches on a threshold through this connection to the window, which "has special import in terms of the social and symbolic positioning of the woman – [it] is the interface between inside and outside, the feminine space of the family and reproduction and the masculine space of production. It facilitates a communication by means of a look between the two sexually differentiated spaces" (Doane 72). Significantly, Ellen is associated most often with open and opening windows, thus blurring the line between the domestic feminine space and the public masculine space Doane describes. Significantly, in one of the key moments of decision in her struggle with the vampire, Ellen is seen gazing through window that remains closed as a procession of coffins moves along the street. In this scene, Ellen resolves to sacrifice her life to end the plague. Later in the film, she opens the window to invite Orlok, the vampire, into her bedroom, despite the quarantine order:

By opening the window, [Ellen] violates official orders and signals her willingness to allow the outside world into her private domain, rather than merely to watch the street from a safe enclosure or to turn - like [Hutter] - completely away from what is outside. [Ellen] is thus consistently associated with the act of opening – the window, *The Book of Vampires*, her eyes when she awakens – a type of action that contrasts with the act of closing in, hiding one's eyes, not daring to look, and seeking refuge in confinement. (Waller 192)

Her open eyes and her willingness to look are the source of her transgression. She is not content with confinement; she seeks a world beyond her home and in doing so, she disrupts society. First, she opens the book despite Hutter's command that she should not and then she disobeys the quarantine order to entice the vampire to her side. Her acts persistently portray her as being willing to cross boundaries and she reaches beyond the threshold of the window with her gaze, merging the two disparate sexual spheres. She dares to disobey male authority and her actions define her movement

from object to subject. Ellen's rejection of male authority in these scenes is an outward example of her inner struggle with the world which confines her through its rules.

Directly linked to the notion of windows and the act of opening, is the gaze. Throughout the film, Ellen dares to *look* and "in the classical narrative cinema, to see is to desire" (Williams, L. 83). Ellen's interactions with the vampire, then, are imbued with a sense of desire for the monster. She *looks* at him several times in the film and on the first occasion, her spectatorship effectively removes Hutter, the male protagonist, from this central role. In this pivotal sequence, Ellen has a vision of Hutter in the distant castle, the vampire poised over him and ready to attack. She intervenes, but draws Orlok's attention. The crosscutting here suggests an exchange between the two: they are looking at each other while Hutter cowers in the corner. Kenneth Calhoon highlights the contrast between Ellen and Hutter calling it a "literal turning point [which] represents a lateral realignment of reciprocal address whose circuit now excludes Hutter, shown variously with his head covered or his eyes simply averted and shut tight" (645). Where Ellen is associated with opening and looking, Hutter becomes aligned with closing and averting his gaze². Arguably, the critical moment of Ellen's gaze occurs on the night of her death. She stares out of her window across the street at the vampire. They lock eyes for a moment and finally, Ellen throws open her window, her arms wide and Orlok accepts this invitation. He leaves his voyeur's post and makes his way to Ellen's bedroom. In discussing this scene and the exchange of looks as it unfolds, Linda Williams observes that "the woman's look of horror paralyzes her in such a way that distance is overcome; the monster's...own spectacular appearance holds her originally active, curious look in a trance-like passivity that allows him to master her through *her* look" (86). Ellen begins as active, in a sense luring the vampire to her bedroom, but as the monster approaches, he gains power over her and reduces her to passivity. Her sacrifice, though freely chosen, relegates her from being the observer to being observed and her death completes this transformation from the position of subject to that of object.

The final sequence removes Ellen's agency. When the vampire enters her bedroom, she averts her gaze, only to have his shadow hand grasp her heart. She writhes in agony, but her eyes remain closed. The fact that Ellen no longer looks symbolizes her loss of power. Murnau's script, included in Lotte Eisner's biography of the director, states that when the sun begins to rise over the town "Nosferatu raises his head. He looks drunk with pleasure. Ellen's eyes are full of terrible fear. She must not allow Nosferatu just to go. She puts her arms round him; he cannot resist and bends his head

² A further example occurs later in the film back in Wisborg. After Ellen reads the forbidden book, the couple argues. She goes to the window, points at the vampire's new home across from their own where he can be seen staring at their bedroom window, and exclaims (via intertitle), "So sehe ich es – jeden Abend...!!!" ("That is what I look at - every night!"). In response, Hutter runs to the window, briefly looks out, then turns his back and shakes his head in denial. Ellen, distraught, clutches the book to her chest and leaves the room, prompting Hutter to once more look out of the window. Again, his response is retreat – he backs away, and collapses onto the bed where he covers his head.

over her again” (269). In the film, however, her eyes remain closed, she remains passive on the bed and Andrew P. Williams argues that

because Murnau chose not to include Ellen’s forcible delaying of Orlock’s [sic] departure, her sexual power is greatly compromised. Orlock [sic] appears to die because he stayed too long at the feast, rather than because he could not tear himself away from Ellen’s seductive grasp....Even though she has been instrumental in destroying the vampire, the pure Ellen has been tainted by his unwholesome touch and must die. (99)

In dying, then, Ellen becomes a powerless object – she no longer dares to look and she does not open her eyes until the light of the sun destroys the monster. In the pivotal moment, she is acted upon, but does not act; she is finally passive. Her transgression is not just the contact with the vampire, but the acts of looking and opening with which she is associated throughout the film. While *her* eyes remain closed, the open window remains in the frame, a reminder of her disobedience, and the vampire stares balefully across her prone form as he drains her blood, demonstrating that he has taken the power of the gaze from her. After Orlok’s dissolution, Ellen awakens for a moment. She looks expectantly around the room and when Hutter arrives, she collapses and is dead. He bends over her body in a position that recalls the vampire’s embrace only moments before. The threat to society is defeated – both the vampire and the disobedient woman perish.

While Ellen transitions from object to subject to object, Greta, her modern counterpart, is always an object. Merhige uses tenets of Weimar filmmaking with a focus on the direction of the gaze to establish this portrayal. Richard McCormick outlines key elements of Weimar cinema, stating that “Weimar films often foreground seeing and looking...and they call attention to many of the elements by which the cinema constructs narrative – camera, editing, lighting....The overt emphasis on the gaze in Weimar cinema has definite political implications concerning issues of sexuality and power” (30). The style of *Shadow of the Vampire*, with its use of “behind-the-scenes” footage, the recreation of shots from the original *Nosferatu*, the focus on the camera and how it captures film, employs the self-reflexivity of the source material, indeed, “the stunning cinematography, eerily evocative of the old silents and, uncannily of *Nosferatu* itself” (Toumarkine 32) creates the sense that “German Expressionism lives here within provocative sets and settings of remarkable veracity” (32). In so doing, Merhige draws attention to the issues of the gaze, sexuality and power through the treatment of Greta. The depiction of Murnau, played by John Malkovich, as a mad genius director who is always in control of what the camera sees and who repeatedly exerts his power over Greta³, contributes to the emphasis placed on the construction of a film, as well as the actress’s objectification. Where Ellen becomes a subject by daring to look, Greta dares to draw the look through acts of self-objectification. First seen through the camera, she never moves out of its gaze. While her demeanour, her appearance

³ For instance, she disagrees with him about leaving Berlin to shoot the film on site, but he ignores her plea to remain in the vibrant city. Her wishes and needs are immaterial to him.

and her behaviour categorize her as a vamp figure and she attempts to assert power, she never becomes a subject and, as Linda Williams argues, “[t]he bold, smouldering dark eyes of the silent screen vamp offer an obvious example of a powerful female look. But the dubious moral status of such heroines, and the fact that they must be punished in the end, undermine the legitimacy and authentic subjectivity of this look” (85). Any power Greta believes she possesses is an illusion. She might feel that the attention of “a theatrical audience gives [her] life,” and that the camera, which she disdainfully calls a “*thing*” “merely takes it from [her],” but she never understands that in both instances she is a lifeless, passive object with no control of her situation.

The extent of her objectification becomes clear in the final act of the film, as she is conspicuously absent during the journey to the vampire’s castle and the drama that begins to unfold there. She re-enters the narrative in time to die, but not to take an active part in the story’s resolution. Arguably, her inability to perceive the threat stems from her “dubious moral status.” There are hints in all of her brief appearances of her promiscuity and in a key sequence shortly before her death scene, Greta draws the men of the production, Fritz Wagner, the cameraman, and Albin Grau, the producer, to her room through her screams. When they burst in, they find her writhing on the bed shrieking and laughing by turns, with her blouse undone. They determine that she had taken morphine. The two men leave her to her drug-induced hysteria and lock her in her room. Greta’s life as a vampy actress prevents her from being the heroine of the film, because “in most horror films, the tradition of the woman ‘pure of heart’ is still going strong; the woman’s power to resist the monster is directly proportional to her absence of sexual desire. Clarity of vision...can only exist in this absence” (Williams, L. 93). For the audience, as well as for the men in the film, Greta is an object of spectacle at all times. She is performing a role even when she is not on the stage or in front of the camera and as such, she always seeks to be looked at: she desires to be the focus of the gaze in an attempt to assert control over those who look. Her concept of agency is located in her own objectification. Additionally, the longing for the gaze is in itself a transgression. Her constant performance is meant to elicit a response from the men around her. Her career as an actress and striving for fame are acts of self-objectification, but they also place her on the margins of femininity. While she upholds the female status as object, she defies other conventions, such as those of marriage and motherhood⁴.

⁴ These traits align Greta with what Richard McCormick identifies as a “general crisis of gendered identity” (4) in the Weimar period, symbolized by “the working, sexually emancipated, unsentimental ‘New Woman’” (4). And Barbara Hales argues that, “It was feared that the New Woman, with her perceived self-interested orientation toward career advancement, had the potential to undermine the social fabric. [...]The Weimar woman navigated between the masculine world of career and her traditional role as mother and homemaker. [...] The alleged trend of masculinized women, synonymous with the New Woman’s androgyny, was decried by many critics who saw them as a threat to the stability of family and state” (318). While Greta is not androgynous, she does represent a threat to the patriarchal order through her promiscuity and apparent rejection of marriage and motherhood in favour of an acting career.

The death scene amplifies her objectification and is possibly the most disturbing moment of the film. Where Ellen's death was a self-sacrifice, a choice, Greta's death is murder. She enters the set confident and full of questions that go unanswered. As the men prepare her for the scene, placing her on the bed and taking off her shoes, she glances at the mirror and notices that Schreck has no reflection. At this point, she realizes the danger. Arguably, in this one moment, Greta dares to *look* rather than simply daring to be seen, but her sudden awareness of her vulnerable position comes too late, her fate is sealed. She begs the men to help her, but instead of protecting her, they hold her down, "sie wehrt sich und wird wie ein Opfer mit einer Spritze ruhiggestellt. Ihre Hilflosigkeit mag die Angstlust des Zuschauers steigern"⁵ (Houswitschka and Meyer 180). The fact that Murnau injects her with a drug to calm her is an act reminiscent of her own drug use, but now it is also a further violation of her will and her body. She finally *sees* and Murnau forcibly closes her eyes, penetrating her arm with a needle as a preamble to the vampire's penetrating bite. In this sequence, Greta embodies the depiction of too many women in horror films as passive victims, made helpless in the face of the monster. The loss of consciousness is the final step in her objectification, an objectification that is part of the genre. Her bout of hysteria plays into the trope as well, because "when the women in horror films are not being depicted in hysterically negative ways...they are depicted as objects. Shapely, warm, and desirable objects, to be sure, but objects nonetheless" (Hogan 69). She is warm, enticing and utterly helpless. At the last, she is passive, nearly inanimate, a true object. The men have subdued her so that she no longer threatens their position of power through her desire for acclaim; now, she can be looked *at* without eliciting the act, without enjoying being the object of their gaze.

This stillness, this complete passivity makes her more alluring than her active, attention-seeking performance throughout the film. Basing her work on Laura Mulvey, Jody Keisner argues that the movie audience gains pleasure as "a result of viewing another as an object...both by identifying with the images on the screen and by objectifying the images [and] the actress's function has been that of sexually objectified image while the actor takes the active role of 'advancing the story'" (420), in Greta's case, the audience enters into a complex relationship of identification and objectification while watching her murder. As she transforms from animate person to inanimate corpse, it becomes clear that Greta never had power, she has always been an object of the gaze and the final scenes are a definitive statement of her status as a passive recipient of the audience's attention, or, in this case, of the vampire's and the camera's gaze. Furthermore, the sequence clarifies that her true opponent is not the vampire, but rather the director. While she begins to slip into a drug-

⁵ "she struggles and, like a victim, is calmed with an injection. Her helplessness may increase the desire for fear in the audience" (my translation). Houswitschka and Meyer explain "Angstlust" as "die bewusste Suche nach einer ganz bestimmten Mischung von Furcht, Angst, Lust und Hoffnung. Die Erfahrung lustvoller Angst erlaubt es dem Publikum, seine Grenzen zu erproben und vergangene Erfahrungen und negative Gefühle abzuarbeiten" (175) ("the conscious search for a specific combination of dread, fear, lust and hope. The experience of desirable fear allows the audience to explore its boundaries and to work through past experiences and negative feelings" [my translation]).

induced haze, she flashes back to a conversation with Murnau and recalls his words that the role of Ellen “is the role that will make [her] great as an actress” and to “consider it a sacrifice for [her] art.” These recollections solidify the link between the director and the monster. The audience knows that Murnau has traded Greta’s life for the vampire’s participation in the film. Ultimately, Fritz Wagner and Albin Grau attempt to overpower Schreck, but they are also killed. Murnau captures their deaths on film, completely unmoved and “it becomes clear that Murnau, the technician-scientist dressed in a white lab coat, is far more monstrous than the ugly little bundle of desires embodied by the vampire” (Day 126). Indeed, the director sacrifices his colleagues without remorse in order to complete his picture. Against this adversary, the man in control of the camera’s gaze, Greta, the film crew, and even the vampire, are powerless. In the end, they are all only objects.

Two issues emerge from this analysis. The first is the connection between agency, desire, transgression and the death of a beautiful woman. The second is the success of sacrificing a woman’s life in order to vanquish evil. Agency, desire and transgression are three closely connected issues in each of these films. While both women straddle the margins of their prescribed gender role and both are punished with death for doing so, only Ellen succeeds in restoring order to the world through her sacrifice. Greta’s murder superficially closes the cycle of disruption her acute self-objectification initiates but does not offer real resolution. With respect to images of dead women, Elisabeth Bronfen writes, “over her dead body, cultural norms are reconfirmed or secured, whether because the sacrifice of virtuous, innocent woman serves as a social critique and transformation or because a sacrifice of the dangerous woman re-establishes an order that was momentarily suspended due to her presence” (181). The death of each woman in the two films marks the end of the story and provides at least a nominal sense of closure. Neither Ellen, nor Greta are representations of pure women, they both reach, or in the case of Ellen, look, beyond their assigned roles. Greta is never portrayed as domestic and Ellen appears to chafe at the constraint of the home, especially in the absence of her husband. Their desires require atonement through death. Their eyes betray them; the gaze condemns each of them to their fate, because “the woman’s exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization” (Doane 72). The woman’s gaze is a source of unease for the male subject, thus requiring that the threat of woman as potential subject is extinguished. However, the brutal portrayal of Greta’s death and the fact that Murnau, the orchestrator of the nefarious deeds in the film, survives unscathed, call for one further consideration. Ellen’s adversary is a clear embodiment of evil, a foreign threat to the tranquility of the city. Greta, on the other hand, faces a less obvious monster. Where Weimar cinema portrayed an unambiguous delineation between good and evil, with a clearly defined villain, the modern film presents a nuanced source of evil and posits that wickedness can rest within anyone. The vampire disintegrates, but Murnau does not die. He is not vanquished at the end of the film for the part he plays in the deaths of his crewmembers; instead, he completes his artistic

work to great acclaim. The death of a beautiful woman is thus rendered powerless against the subtle malevolence of the camera, the device that turns all it sees into objects.

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