

***Wir sind die Nacht*: Transcript**

During this presentation I will look to investigate Dennis Gansel's 2010 film *Wir sind die Nacht* and the way it uses its vampire narrative to discuss contemporary German society. The film tells the story of an all-female vampire clan living in Berlin, who sleep by day and roam the city's bars and clubs by night. Whilst this offers them a hedonistic and carefree lifestyle, the group's leader, Louise longs to find someone to offer her eternal love to accompany the life vampirism has given her. When she meets the young petty-thief Lena, she thinks she may have found exactly this and, without giving Lena much option, quickly goes about turning her into a vampire. Yet, the problem is that Lena has already begun to fall in love with a local policeman called Tom, which means that, as she struggles to adapt to her new found life as a vampire, she also battles to leave Tom behind and fully embrace the vampiric way of life represented by Louise, a fight that plays through to the film's finale.

By placing its vampires at the heart of Berlin's famous post-unification nightlife, the film is able to develop a narrative which offers a wide critique on both youth culture in present day Germany and the state of German society as it emerges from the shock of unification. Therefore, in the following analysis we will begin to explore the sort of issues that this feeds into, examining how vampiric otherness is used as an outlet through which wider societal problems are investigated.

However, before looking at the film itself, it is first necessary to briefly discuss both the post-unification development of Berlin and the historic use of vampires in film, as this will allow us to fully understand the sort of debates *Wir sind die Nacht* feeds into. Following on from this, the vampires' role in the film will be explored with the aim of highlighting how the film uses the vampire genre to investigate two different but linked issues, namely the party

lifestyle of young people in Berlin and the globalisation of the city following the fall of the Wall, and what its depiction of these issues says about the impact they have within wider German society.

Berlin

Whilst Berlin may now be regarded as a leading global capital city, this is a reputation that has only been re-established relatively recently. Although the city was a major world metropolis during the first half of the twentieth century, following the end of the Second World War Berlin became a divided city as it was split between the four victorious powers of Russia, Great Britain, France and the United States. This division which was solidified with the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and so the city became a political outpost during the Cold War, losing its wider significance and influence. The Wall ran through the centre of the city, disrupting Berlin's traditional thoroughfares and commercial centres and creating a no-mans-land in the heart of the city.

However, when the Wall fell on 9th November 1989 this signalled the end of this division, with Berlin eventually being officially unified on 3rd October 1990. Yet, due to the problems created by the division of Berlin, the centre of the city was unable to function as a unified entity straight away and instead needed to undergo a programme of major transformation and renovation to bring its two halves together. This included re-joining the transport networks between West and East Berlin, renovating the buildings in the city centre that had lain vacant since the end of the War and instigating new building projects to bring the vast swathes of vacant space in the city which had acted as the buffer zone surrounding the wall back to life. All this meant that, by the end of the 1990s, Berlin was the largest building site in the world, with the chaos and confusion caused by the rapidly altering cityscape following unification

leading to the image of Berlin both within cinema and wider society becoming that of a city in transition which was struggling to regain its importance at home and abroad.

Nevertheless, two decades on from the fall of the Wall, contemporary Berlin has begun to emerge from its period of post-unification transformation and establish itself as a major global city once more. Central to this process has been redefining the city's global image, something which *Wir sind die Nacht's* depiction of Berlin feeds into. At the forefront of this reinvention of the city's identity has been the promotion of Berlin as a Mecca for young people from around the world as the city has become a cool location for international youth culture. In particular, Berlin has become known as a creative city where people come to immerse themselves in a pleasure-seeking and relaxed nightlife. This reputation has its origins in the 1990s as Berlin developed a vibrant illegal rave scene thanks to the plethora of empty buildings that existed in the city following unification. Yet, in comparison to this, present day Berlin's nightlife has gradually developed into something more organised and permanent which now boast all the amenities demanded from an international hedonistic hub for young people who want to enjoy all the luxuries associated with this way of life and it is this globalisation of Berlin's youth culture that is central to understanding how the film uses its vampire characters.

Vampire Theory

Whilst this helps to begin to explain the world the vampires in the film inhabit, it is also necessary to look at how vampires have been traditionally used by cinema to fully understand the issues and problems being discussed by *Wir sind die Nacht*. Cinema has a long held obsession with vampires which dates back to the 1920s and the German Expressionist film *Nosferatu* (Murnau 1922), which told the story of Dracula on screen for the very first time.

Since then films have repeatedly drawn on vampire folklore to scare their audiences. Unlike other, more animalistic monsters that are also found within the horror genre, vampires look and act like humans yet their blood thirsty desires set them apart from what is understood as normal human behaviour. As a result, vampires in cinema have often been used for their humanlike ‘otherness’ where they may resemble the other characters in the film in looks, but their abnormal behaviour places them outside of normal society. It is this abnormal otherness which has shaped the role of vampires in cinema as it is often used in film narratives to reflect wider societal problems or concerns.

An example of this can be seen in the early *Dracula* films, where the vampire’s racial otherness, as an aristocrat from Transylvania, was played upon to feed into societal concerns at the time in regards to immigration from Eastern Europe. Yet, as the vampire was usually the villain of the film, and therefore something that the main characters had to overcome and defeat, this meant that, although cinema was able to add greater narrative depth by playing on the vampires’ otherness, this was done so in a wholly one-dimensional, negative way as the vampire, and by association the issues they represented, came to be villainised.

However, more recently the way vampires are used in film has begun to change, as rather than casting them as the villains, films have begun to treat their vampire characters more sympathetically, often making them the main protagonists within the narrative. This change in focus has meant that vampire characters are now explored in greater depth by films, which in turn means that the film’s viewers get to know more about the vampires’ back-story, their motivations and the struggles they feel towards their desire for blood. Consequently, whilst these characters have not lost their otherness, the way they are depicted in contemporary films often means that this otherness is foregrounded within the narrative, an approach which also allows for a more detailed and well-rounded discussion of the societal issues associated

with the vampires to be developed as vampires are now not always cast in simplistic, villainous terms.

One of the first major films to do this was *Interview with the Vampire* (Jordan 1994) which used a vampire called Louis as the film's narrator to tell the story of his life as a vampire and, in particular, the relationship he had with another male vampire called Lestat. Whilst it is not overtly sexual, the closeness of this relationship clearly feeds into issues of homosexuality, as the film foregrounds the sexual otherness of its vampire characters to offer a discussion on the changing perceptions towards this sort of lifestyle within society at the time. This is also a technique employed by the recent *Twilight* series of films as they have used the relationship between Edward and Bella to explore issues of teenage sexuality and the pros and cons of sex before marriage. Thus, as nearly all the main characters are vampires in *Wir sind die Nacht*, the film is clearly aligning itself to the more contemporary use of vampires within cinema, as by casting Lena, Louise and the others as the main protagonists in the narrative, the film is able to use their vampiric otherness as a way of adding great depth to its depiction of contemporary Berlin and its youth culture.

Youth Culture and Contemporary Germany

Therefore, with all this in mind, if we move on to look at the film itself it could be argued that, on first inspection *Wir sind die Nacht* seems like a celebration of contemporary youth culture within Berlin as the lifestyle which the vampires engage with is firmly rooted in the bars and clubs of the young, cool part of the city for which Berlin has become increasingly famous. This party scene is shown to be the very pinnacle of contemporary hedonism in the film, as it contains masses of young people drinking heavily and taking drugs. However, the way that the film depicts this in such a dismissive way, is done so to mirror the attitude

towards these potentially dangerous and illegal activities within Berlin's modern-day youth population. It shows how taking drugs and binge drinking are treated as normal within present-day society, creating an image of Berlin's club culture that is one of carefree excess where no one seems to be too concerned with the wider consequences of their actions, as long as they can find quick pleasures within the city's nightlife, and it is this attitude that forms the basis to the way the vampires are used in the film to evaluate the issues surrounding contemporary youth culture.

The vampires are central to the film's engagement with the city's nightlife as they are shown to not just be participating in, but also to be at the centre of, the city's party scene. This can be seen in the fact that the club where Lena first encounters the group and is subsequently bitten by Louise, is entirely run by the vampires, with Louise acting as manager and Nora the club's DJ, a setup which is further strengthened by the fact that none of the human employees or patrons are even acknowledged by the film. This lack of any strong engagement with the human characters within Berlin's nightlife causes the film's depiction of the city's party scene to take on a somewhat menacing personality as, by casting the vampires as the people who are running Berlin's nightlife, the depiction of the city's clubs within the film also, by association, takes on an abnormal otherness. Therefore, the vampires' abnormal presence within Berlin's nightlife comes to critique the role which this lifestyle is playing within modern-day Germany.

The film's depiction of the city's party goers may show them living a pleasure-seeking life of excess but it does not necessarily condone this lifestyle. Instead it uses the vampires to highlight the dangers that lurk within this part of society, something which can be seen in the way the film contrasts images of Berlin partygoers downing shots and taking cocaine alongside the vampires' consumption of blood, which at varying points in the film is also drunk from shot glasses and snorted from tables. By vampirising the excesses of Berlin's

clubbers, the film shows how they are actually an abnormal threat to society, feeding into contemporary debates surrounding young people's binge drinking and drug use. Whilst drink and drugs may superficially seem like a harmless part of the hedonistic lifestyle desired by many young people within society, the blood thirsty undertones that exists within the vampires' engagement with them shows that in fact it is a dangerous threat to the individual which has potentially deadly consequences.

Alongside this the vampires live in a luxury hotel, are seen shopping for designer clothes in Berlin's top department store and eat in the most exclusive restaurants, all of which are locations that would not be out of place in some of the most expensive and fashionable cities in the world. Therefore, not only is Berlin's youth culture defined as a lifestyle of hedonistic, carefree enjoyment but it is also a luxurious one, enjoyed by an internationalised elite. Whereas the squatter movements and illegal raves found in Berlin in the 1990s were a somewhat egalitarian scene, where money and status did not really matter, *Wir sind die Nacht* shows how this has now changed. The party goers in the film are far more image conscious, and are prepared to pay for the hedonistic lifestyle they desire, yet the way the film associates this with the vampires also illustrates the problems that result from the superficial elitism which is present within contemporary youth culture in Germany. Before meeting the vampires, Lena is a scruffy tom boy with piercing and tattoos who does not really care about her appearance but after being bitten by Louise, her transformation into a vampire is not just biological but physical. Her tattoos and hair dye are literally cleansed away as her image is transformed into one that is far more in line with the expectations of Berlin's party scene.

However, the fact that her make-over and subsequent entry into the international elite within the city is also part of her transformation into a vampire creates a critical undertone to the superficial desires of contemporary Berlin to conform to its standards of glamour and beauty is shown to be part of the abnormality associated with the vampires. Consequently, the

vampires come to be the very definition of the aspirational, global, luxury lifestyle that many in contemporary, pleasure-seeking Berlin are striving for. Yet, the problem is that the vampires are shown to be killing for blood in the same light-hearted manner with which they shop for clothes and party. As Nora states at one point, ‘We can eat, drink, take coke and sleep around as much as we like and never become fat, pregnant or addicted.’ Vampirism is, therefore, the height of Berlin’s consumerist lifestyle, as you can indulge in anything you want to and never feel any negative effects, but the portrayal of this lifestyle in the film also shows how it actually offers no real meaning, becoming a superficial and hollow existence that poses an abnormal threat to both those who partake in it and to society as a whole.

Berlin in the Film

Whilst on many levels the vampires’ presence in the film serves to illustrate the threat to the individual that is present within Berlin’s contemporary hedonistic youth culture, their vampiric otherness is also used to discuss wider debates on the state of the city as it emerges from its period of post-unification transformation and establishes itself as a global city once more. As Dennis Gansel stated in an interview to promote the release of the film, ‘Without Berlin, the film would not have been possible’ and so it is important to also consider the way that the vampires’ relationship to Berlin’s party scene is constructed in the film, as well as the way that the city’s nightlife itself is portrayed, in order to understand how the film begins to engage with the debates surrounding Berlin’s post-unification regeneration.

We are introduced to the Berlin nightlife early on in the film as Lena accidentally comes across the vampires’ club whilst aimlessly roaming the city streets at night. Initially, she seems to have discovered an illegal rave, much like the ones that 1990s Berlin became famous for, as she sees people climbing through a gap in a fence to enter and, when she follows, she finds

herself in the abandoned *Spreepark* theme park. Just like the surrounding theme park, the corridor from the club's entrance to the dance floor is shown to be derelict and overgrown by weeds, and so one would expect what follows to be similarly run down. Yet, as Lena ventures further into the club itself, it soon becomes clear that what she has discovered is something more permanent and well organised than an illegal rave happening in an abandoned theme park. The main part of the club is revealed to be intact and, although it is obviously an abandoned building being used as a club, it lacks any overt signs of neglect. In fact there is a fully functioning, modern bar which is serving champagne and branded drinks, something that is most obvious by the prevalence of *Red Bull* ice buckets within this scene. Rather than stumbling across an illegal rave, the club that Lena finds herself in would appear to be part of the mainstream nightlife of contemporary Berlin, as it bares the hallmarks of the city's transformation from the haphazard underground nature of its post-unification club scene into an internationally famous location of hedonistic enjoyment. Whilst the building which the club is in may be superficially shabby and run down, the club is serving expensive drinks from a stylish bar to a crowd of young people.

This mix of styles is found throughout the film's engagement with Berlin's nightlife, which means that, through its depiction of Berlin's party lifestyle, the film highlights the city's move away from the transitory, temporary feel of 1990s Berlin and into a more globally recognisable and fashionably cool aesthetic. Whilst on the one hand this helps to show Berlin's break from its problematic period of rebuilding and adoption of a more international style to fit with its new global city status, this does so at the expense of also moving towards a more anonymous globalised aesthetic for the city's famous nightlife, which lacks some of the local personality and resonance of Berlin's infamous rave scene in the 1990s.

The potential problems which this increasingly homogenous city style poses for society is only exacerbated by, as was argued earlier, the fact that the vampires are not just participating

in but also running this world of global hedonism. Therefore, rather than being seen as a positive development, the vampiric undertones that the film gives to Berlin's transformation into a globalised city highlights the issues which this redevelopment has created, the impact of which becomes clear as the film reaches its finale. This is because, much like the city's own current position as it enters its post-transformation reality, Lena's entry into the vampire clan leaves her at a junction. To fully embrace the hedonistic global lifestyle of the vampires would mean leaving behind her family and the ordinary way of life she knows in Berlin, as well as turning her back on the potential true love she has found with Tom. Yet, to reject the vampires would mean that she would also lose her position within the seductive, global world they occupy, forcing her to return to her more mundane existence in the city, a life which seemingly had few prospects.

The choice which Lena faces between these two lifestyles mimics the position Berlin now finds itself in as it surveys the reality which has been left behind following its post-unification regeneration and the possible directions this can take. Of course, in the end Lena recognises that the shallow nature of the hedonistic, global lifestyle of the vampires comes at a price, as this way of life lacks any real substance or meaning and she is no longer prepared to make this sacrifice. Instead she chooses to return to Tom in an attempt to make their relationship work and it is through her rejection of the global vampires that the film highlights the decisions that society within Germany more widely also needs to begin to make. The union of Lena and Tom shows that the globalised path which has been embraced by society during Berlin's regeneration may not be the best strategy in the long term. Whilst the city's youth culture and famous club scene have been used to facilitate the reinvention of Berlin as a global city following the fall of the Wall, the superficial and homogenous way of life represented by this globalised part of society is shown to have become something of a threat to Berlin's post-unification stability. By vampirising these globalising forces within the city,

the film illustrates that, if Berlin wants to be able to develop into a successful world city once more, it needs to be conscious of the growing threat posed by globalisation, no matter how decadent and seductive it may seem at first.

Conclusion

Therefore, to summarise, *Wir sind die Nacht* is a film that makes full use of the potential offered by its vampire genre credentials. By having a narrative that places vampires at the heart of Berlin's infamous contemporary party scene it is able to explore the wider societal concerns that surround this way of life. Its vampires live a life of luxury as they eat in the city's top restaurants, party at its coolest hotspots and sleep at its most exclusive hotels, all of which is done whilst wearing a glamorous wardrobe of designer clothing. In many ways, therefore, the film's vampire characters are shown to be the ultimate symbol of the hedonistic, carefree lifestyle favoured by Berlin's modern-day youth culture.

However, the fact that these vampires are also blood thirsty killers is used by the film to highlight the negative aspects of this way of life. Through the vampires blood soaked rampage through the city's clubs, the film explores prominent issues for young people in Germany, such as drug addiction and the pressure to conform, and so rather than being a celebration of Berlin's reputation as a global hub for young people, the film offers a multi-layered depiction of the highs and lows of this part of city life. In particular, it shows the hollow and superficial nature of contemporary youth culture and the link this has to the pressures of globalisation, a critique that comes to inform the film's wider discussion of post-unification Berlin and its transformation from a divided city into a global metropolis. This is best seen through the character of Lena, as the film uses her struggle to adapt to her new

found life as vampire as a symbol for the wider struggle underway in Berlin to come to terms with the city's new found global status.

Ultimately, therefore, *Wir sind die Nacht* is a film that offers a timely and cautionary take on contemporary German youth culture as, although the film may go a long way to redefining concepts of post-unification Berlin as a city full of international, cool young people, through the vampires it places amongst them, it also highlights the problems that are created for many in contemporary Germany by the sort of pleasure-seeking way of life this represents.