

Vampyr

With an original score by Lori Goldston
performed by the artist

January 11 & 13, 2025, Grand Illusion Cinema, Seattle, WA
Co-presented by The Sprocket Society

German title: Vampyr – Der Traum des Allan Gray.

French title: Vampyr, ou L'étrange aventure de David Gray.

German premiere: May 6, 1932, Ufa-Theater Kurfürstendamm, Berlin.

French premiere: September 24, 1932, Studio Raspail, Paris.

Danish premiere: March 27, 1933, Metropol Teatret, Copenhagen.

US release: August 1934 as *Not Against Flesh* (a shortened and dubbed version).

US secondary release: ca. 1939 as *Castle of Doom* (an even shorter version).

Credits: Produced by Carl Dreyer & “Julian West” (Nicolas de Gunzburg). Directed by Carl Dreyer. Screenplay by Carl Dreyer & Christen Jul, freely adapted from Sheridan Le Fanu’s short stories “Camilla” and “The Room in the Dragon Volant” in his collection *In a Glass Darkly* (1872). Cinematography: Rudolph Maté. Editor: Tonka Taldy. Art direction: Hermann Warm. Assistant directors: Ralph Christian Holm & Eliane Tayar. Camera operator: Louis Née. Set assistants: Preben Birck & César Silvagni. Music: Wolfgang Zeller. Sound: Hans Bittmann & Paul Falkenberg.

Cast: “Julian West” *alias* Nicolas de Gunzburg (Allan Grey). Maurice Schultz (The Lord of the Manor). Rena

Mandel (Gisèle). Sybille Schmitz (Léone). Jan Hiéronimko (The Village Doctor). Henriette Gérard (The Woman from the Cemetery). Albert Bras (The Old Valet). N. Babanini (The Valet’s Wife). Jane Mora (The Nurse). George Boidin (The One-Legged Man).

Tonight’s print: a 16mm copy of the Danish subtitled version, with no English subtitles. The image was clumsily enlarged from its original narrow 1.19:1 aspect ratio, resulting in odd framing in many shots. Prior to 1999, all commonly available copies in the US were based on this version, with poor quality English subtitles illegibly printed over the Danish ones. Frankly, their absence here only improves the viewing experience.

About the Film

“I wanted to create a daydream on film, and I wanted to show that the sinister lies not in the things around us but in our own subconscious.” – Carl Dreyer

In 1928, Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer's film *The Passion of Joan of Arc* scandalized French nationalists, was censored by both the French government and the Catholic Church, and then failed at the box office. The French studio that backed it, Société Générale des Films, cancelled their contract for another film. Dreyer sued and then lingered in a professional limbo until eventually winning in 1931.

Nonetheless, in late 1929 Dreyer began developing his next project, determined to work independently of any studio. Through a friend in French Surrealist circles, he was introduced to Baron Nicolas de Gunzburg, a young Belgian aristocrat and film enthusiast. Gunzburg agreed to provide financing, on condition that he play the lead role. Well accustomed to amateur actors, Dreyer agreed and in early 1930 the two formed Film-Productions Carl Dreyer in Paris.

The coming of sound cinema was slow and chaotic in Europe. Initially, England had the best facilities, so Dreyer went there to observe and learn. While in London he met writer Christen Jul (a fellow Dane), and they began collaborating on a script.

Dreyer needed a hit, or at least a success. He settled on filming a

vampire thriller simply because they were fashionable at the time (even before Universal's *Dracula*). After much reading, Dreyer and Jul decided to loosely base their script on two 1872 short stories by Irish author, Sheridan Le Fanu. They drew largely on “Carmilla,” a lesbian vampire tale that had strongly influenced Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and elements of “The Room in the Dragon Volant,” about a victim given an exotic cataleptic drug and then buried alive. A recurring character in several Fanu stories, occult detective Dr. Martin Hesselius, served as inspiration for their protagonist, Allan Gray.

Pre-Production

Dreyer was famous for his exacting realism, but for this he wanted a sense of dreamlike unreality. With the limited budget precluding studio rental or building sets, Paris and its suburbs were scoured for suitably atmospheric (yet affordable) locations.

An old, derelict château was found in the village of Courtempierre, north of the city, and used for both sets and as housing for the cast and crew. It was damp, musty, rat infested and miserable shelter for Dreyer's troupe of 35 people. But it was cheap and had the perfect sinister look on camera.

An old windmill served as five sets, a vicarage as six, a disused ice house was used for the ghost dance and six other sequences, and a country inn was also used.

For the doctor's house set, dozens of spiders collected by local children were locked in with a generous supply of flies, bugs, and rotten meat. A few weeks later, the entire space was exquisitely enshrouded in webs.

One location had a profound effect on the film: a plaster factory that Dreyer and cinematographer Rudolph Maté happened upon. Its workers coated entirely in white dust seemed like eerie anti-shadows detached from the blinding whitewashed walls. This "white discomfort and uneasiness," became the central visual motif, stirring a more disorienting dread than the typical gothic gloom. The death of the doctor was even rewritten so that he smothered in a "flour mill."

The film's art director was Hermann Warm (the set designer for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*), but the only set he created for *Vampyr* was the graveyard.

Casting likewise drew largely from real life. The stern vampire was the sweet mother of an actress. The evil doctor was recruited on a Paris train, and turned out to be a famous and kindly Polish poet. The woman who played Gisèle, the vampire's victim in the garden, worked as a nude model. Baron Gunzburg, also an amateur nonactor, had to adopt the alias "Julian

West" to placate his outraged family when they learned he would be appearing in a movie.

The only professional actors were Sybille Schmitz as the innocent young Léone, and Maurice Schultz as her ill-fated father.

Filming & Post-Production

Principal filming began in the chilly spring of 1930. The climactic graveyard scenes were shot in late summer, evidently as pickups.

Early rushes had an unexpected washed-out look caused by light shining across the lens. Maté and Dreyer decided they liked it and figured out how to reliably recreate the effect by using tulle fabric stretched on a frame before the camera.

Dreyer directed the actors to be largely expressionless and to behave as though they were sleepwalking.

Vampyr was shot entirely silently, with sound added later. The minimal dialog was filmed three times, so the actors could mouth their lines in French, German, and English to better match later dubbing.

Dreyer edited the film in France, and then took it to Germany to do the soundtrack and dubbing at the UFA studios.

Only Gunzburg and Schmitz dubbed their own dialog. The sounds of animals were created by professional imitators. Wolfgang Zeller composed and conducted the score.

There is no evidence the English version was ever completed, despite the footage being shot. (It is now lost.)

Release and Aftermath

UFA, the initial distributor, held the release for nine months, purportedly to see how Universal's 1931 films *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* did.

But the delay did not help *Vampyr*. In Berlin, audiences loudly booed and hissed. In Vienna, they angrily stormed the box office demanding refunds, and police quelled the mob with nightsticks. Paris was apparently a non-event. In Dreyer's native Denmark nearly a year later, response was more favorable but hardly a triumph. An American release by a low-rent distributor who mangled the film vanished with hardly a trace.

Gunzborg lost his entire investment. He never again worked in movies, instead moving to New York City to become a celebrated editor of magazines like *Town & Country* and *Vogue*.

Carl Dreyer suffered a nervous breakdown not long after the release, and committed himself to a sanitarium for three months. It would be over a decade before he made another film: *Day of Wrath* (1943).

Preservation & Restorations

Vampyr's preservation fate has been like that of most independently produced films that failed.

The original camera and sound negatives are all lost. A number of

original 1932 nitrate prints survive, but most are in poor condition. Most other surviving prints are haphazard composites from later copies, often from different languages.

The French version survives, but has not been restored. The Danish Film Institute has a nitrate print of the Danish version, but it is incomplete.

But the German version, which Dreyer himself preferred, has been fully restored to the extent it can be.

Its first restoration was completed in 1999 by Deutsche Kinemathek and Cineteca di Bologna in collaboration with ZDF/ARTE and the Danish Film Institute. The lab work was done by L'Immagine Ritrovata in Bologna. This pre-digital, photochemical restoration produced a 35mm fine grain master.

In 2008, the Criterion Collection scanned that master, did additional digital clean-up, and released it on DVD. In 2018, Criterion re-released it on Blu-Ray.

In 2020, after a decade of work, an all-new 2K digital restoration was completed by the Danish Film Institute, with support from the Creative Europe MEDIA program. The best elements from multiple archives were cataloged, scanned and combined, then digitally cleaned.

The finished restoration was debuted in 2022, the 90th anniversary of the original release. Eureka Video released it on Blu-Ray the same year.