

## Rediscovering *Nadja*

*Geoffrey Badger – Curator of “Lost Vampires”*

The idea of screening Michael Almereyda's 1994 feature *Nadja* started around six months ago when the concept of the *Lost Vampires* season was born. The central premise of *Lost Vampires* – a curatorial project for my MA degree at the National Film and Television School (NFTS) - is to find, celebrate and most importantly, bring back to UK cinemas, exceptional vampire films that for whatever reason have become unavailable, fallen off the radar, or otherwise gone inexplicably missing. From the very beginning *Nadja* perfectly symbolised the programme. The quintessential *Lost Vampires* film, *Nadja* isn't just a fascinating, one-of-a-kind vampire movie, it's one that seems to exist literally in the shadows, lost and awaiting rediscovery, possibly the greatest “lost vampire” of them all.

I first became aware of *Nadja* in 1995 when it was released in the US, where I was living at the time, and I saw it on the now long obsolete laserdisc format. I clearly remember my anticipation of the film and first impressions. Marketed in the US as a straightforward genre film (the lurid synopsis on the back cover is quite something to read) it was immediately clear upon actual viewing that there was rather more to the film than the distributor's marketing pitch. Visually sumptuous, the film was practically overflowing with ideas, and although the story includes many of the classic vampire characters including Van Helsing, Renfield, Lucy, and even Count Dracula, it reimagines them all in radical new ways. Informed by surrealism, the film deliberately sets up many intentional collisions: a luminous visual style with deadpan humour, an impeccably cool vampire with a long-haired paranoid vampire hunter, and along the way serves up many treats such as when it segues into philosophical discourse, striking imagery or dreamlike soundscapes. Finally, there's Pixelvision, technically the PXL2000 from Fischer Price, a toy camera that produces low-resolution shimmering pixelated images and which is used periodically throughout the film to convey impressionistic views, a visual gambit Almereyda and cinematographer Jim Denault had previously used to great effect in *Another Girl Another Planet* (1992). A very interesting film indeed.

Many years passed with *Nadja* stuck in my mind, but there was little chance to revisit it. After the demise of laserdisc and VHS there were very minor DVD releases in the US (the most recent being a bizarre four-film vampire collection in 2009 with two films on each side

of a double-sided DVD) but all versions of the film seemed to be sourced from the same standard definition master created at the same time as original release. In the UK the situation was even worse. After a limited theatrical release by ICA Projects, the film was only ever briefly available on VHS and never released on DVD. There were a couple of German DVD releases in the mid-2000s complete with German language revoicing where the replacement of Elina Löwensohn's beautifully accented tones is particularly jarring - though Peter Fonda's now guttural and slightly high-pitched Van Helsing is a close runner-up. Finally, to my knowledge, *Nadja* has never been available on any digital rental or streaming platform in any country ever. How then could we bring *Nadja* back to the UK, let alone in its original glory?

In order to show *Nadja* we needed to locate both rights and screening materials and this began with research to see if there had been any recent screenings. After some different web searches a few US-based events began to appear in the results: a 2018 showing at the Lincoln Center to celebrate Pixelvision, a screening as part of a "Sapphic Vampires" season at the Quad Cinema also in 2018, and an even more recent screening at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in 2019. The BAM were enormously helpful and were able to point us towards a specific person at David Lynch's company to discuss the rights, since as executive producer of the film they had reverted to him. After emailing the David Lynch company it was quickly confirmed this was the case, but two steps were necessary before a screening could be discussed: secure director Michael Almereyda's support and locate a suitable 35mm print.

The first requirement – contact the director and obtain his approval – was something we decided to pursue only after we had located a print, but this seemed to be possible because the Head of the Film Curation programme at NFTS had previously screened the director's films at several film festivals and would likely be able to contact him when the time was right. The second requirement – finding a suitable print – was potentially more challenging. All the screenings uncovered so far had been in the US, and when print sources were listed, they were US archival prints: in one case from the Harvard Film Archive (HFA) and in the other case the UCLA Archive. An extensive further search of film archives and print sources in the UK led to nothing, in fact the only prints we were able to locate anywhere in the world were the two US prints previously identified. Not only would it be financially unfeasible to bring a print from the US for our screening, archives are very particular about their print loans and it is almost certain they would not be willing to make their prints available to us. A search for suitable digital masters held by DVD companies also led nowhere but reviewing European

film archives thankfully turned up a lead. Researching the Paris Cinémathèque archive we discovered that *Nadja* had screened at the Cinémathèque in October 2019 as part of an extensive vampire programme there. Although the Cinémathèque was closed due to COVID we found the programme curator's email and sent him a message asking him for details, and to our delight he replied almost immediately providing us a contact in their programming team and we were given the email address of a film distribution company in Barcelona as a possible print source. With no website or phone number available we emailed them and received the news we had been hoping for: they indeed had a pristine print of *Nadja*, the only caveat being that it had Spanish subtitles. This was the same print used for the Paris screening and as far as we know the only print to exist in Europe.

With a viable 35mm print identified we felt we could now approach Michael Almereyda with our request for his endorsement of our screening. If Michael was willing to bless our event, then we would then have met the two pre-conditions stated by the David Lynch company and could return to them to request a formal rights release. Fortunately, Michael responded to our email quickly and positively and kindly proposed some potential involvement on his part if our event were to actually happen. Having obtained Michael's approval we then wrote back to David Lynch with our formal request which was for a single screening as part of the *Lost Vampires* project. Nervous days followed during which we anxiously awaited a response after which we received the news we had been hoping for. Given Michael's support for our project, David Lynch had personally approved our request, and we could go forward to make plans for a screening.

Flash-forward two months and our *Nadja* event is now scheduled for September 25<sup>th</sup> at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in central London for what we believe will be the first screening in the UK for more than 25 years. We expect this to be a memorable event and our vision to bring this fascinating film back to UK cinema audiences is now almost realised. Projecting *Nadja* again after so long will be something quite special and we hope as many people as possible will be able to come and discover, or rediscover, this wonderful film.

And what for *Nadja* after this? We hope this screening plays some part to reignite interest in the film. Next steps may be for an adventurous boutique Blu-ray company or another film curator or distributor, but as the recent screenings in the New York, Paris and now London show, there *is* interest in this stimulating, one-of-a-kind film. Meanwhile *Lost Vampires* is

developing a life of its own beyond the current programme. For every lost vampire we were able to locate and screen, there were at least two lost vampires we had to leave in the dark because of issues we were temporarily unable to solve. There's much more work to do and we plan to do it. So, look for more *Lost Vampires* next year and further events in the future, maybe even a bonus event later this year. In the meantime, enjoy our screening of *Nadja* at the ICA and the rest of the current programme which continues with three further titles at the Prince Charles cinema during October. Unseen. Undead. Unforgettable.