

NOSFERATU: A SYMPHONY OF HORROR [1922]

by

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In mid-nineteenth century Wisborg, a real estate agent, Knock (Alexander Granach), sends his recently married clerk, Hutter (Gustav Von Wagenheim), to the Carpathian Mountains to sell a ruined piece of property to Count Orlock (Max Schreck). Despite the warnings of the locals, Hutter ventures to the dreary castle late at night. He is met by the Count and wined and dined. Upon seeing a photograph of Hutter's wife, the count falls desperately in love (?) with Ellen (Greta Schroeder). The next day, Hutter discovers Count Orlock sleeping in his coffin and realizes that he is a vampire, a Nosferatu. That night, as the Count is about to vampirize him, several thousand miles away, Ellen awakens with her husband's name on her lips, whereupon Orlock withdraws from his victim. Orlock packs and takes a boat to Bremen while Hutter barely escapes the castle and recovers his health in a monastery. Having consumed all the blood on the ship, Orlock arrives in Wisborg in a "death ship" – manned by corpses – bearing the plague in the form of an army of rats. Hutter returns to Wisborg and his wife. Ellen decides that she is the only one who can rid the city of both the plague and the vampire. She fools her

husband into leaving the house, invites the vampire in and allows him to suck her blood until dawn. The rising sun causes him to disintegrate while she dies of loss of blood.

Nosferatu, A Symphony of Horror, is a 1922 German silent film that forms the root of all the vampire films that have followed. It is probably the only silent film ever made that is still scary and affecting to a modern audience.

Director F. W. Murnau and his screenwriter, Henrik Galeen, didn't get permission to adapt the Stoker novel, which was still under copyright protection in 1922. Thus, they substituted the name of Orlock for Dracula, Hutter for Harker, Ellen for Mina, and made some plot changes to avoid legal difficulties. However, the story was so distinctive that this minor face lifting did them little good. Stoker's widow sued and won a settlement. However, she received no money since by the time the legal proceedings ground to a conclusion, the German production company, Prana, was bankrupt.

A few years ago, I began a file in my computer on vampire films: every time I ran across one, I added it. I recently opened that file to find, much to my surprise, over 250 films – far more than I expected. With over 250 films (and many popular novels and stories), the Vampire must be seen as one of our major cultural myths, one that touches a very deep psychic nerve. And this is not only true of our culture. Anthropologists claim that *all* cultures have vampire myths. Before we begin with *Nosferatu*, I want to look at some of the implications of this massive myth structure.

Just as Joseph Campbell, in his book *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, claims that the Hero's Journey is a basic myth structure that encompasses many other myths, I find that the Vampire is a dark mirror image of the Hero Myth. The Vampire myth is so deep, so important, so multi-faceted, that we can find residing within it elements of almost every negative, destructive psychological problem a member of our culture might encounter: sexual maturation problems, gender identity gone wrong, child abuse, incest, living through others, economic exploitation, an orphan's psychic loneliness, repressive gender roles, religious persecution, and so on. Across these many films we also find, on a more

positive note, illustrations of how these problems can be dealt with, and, in some films, revolutionary ideas on how to deal with the society that fostered these problems. But more than this, the Vampire myth is a necessary balance to the (naive) positivism of the Hero myths. Without the vampire, the hero is hollow egoism. Without Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker is just a boy out for a stroll, as would be Arthur without Mordred, or even God without Satan. Without this Manichean dialectic of dark and light, without facing the darkness within and without, we cannot hope to experience real and lasting psychic growth. For this we must recognize and honor the Vampire as a myth necessary to our own psychic completeness.

To fully appreciate and understand *Nosferatu*, we must look at the cultural and artistic environment that spawned it: the Germany of 1922. Artistically, Germany was in the throes of a then avant-garde movement called Expressionism. In essence, an expressionist artist attempted to unearth the deepest feelings from within and place them on the canvas for others to see. However, these feelings differed significantly from those expressed by artists of former generations; these were the darkest feelings of the human soul. Psychologically speaking, these artists were not mining the unconscious as in the Freudian influenced Surrealist movement, but a very specific portion of that unconscious – what Freud would call the Id and what Jung would call the most negative and destructive portions of the Shadow. The major predecessors of the Expressionist movement who directly influenced it are Gustav Klimt, Edvard Munch, Ferdinand Hodler, James Ensor, Arnold Böcklin, Max Klinger and Alfred Kubin, known collectively (along with others) as the Fauves – or the wild beasts. Perhaps the first Expressionist painter was Emile Nolde, who began by painting mountains transformed into giants or trolls, which were then sold on postcards. Many of his paintings were wild interpretations of classical Biblical scenes transformed into carnival-like settings. After these beginnings, Expressionism swept Germany and the neighboring countries like an artistic wildfire.

Orlock's attack on Hutter establishes another horror film tradition. The hero (or heroine) is rarely attacked until *after* they find out about the nature of the evil threatening them.

There is no fun in attacking someone who is unaware of the nature of the danger they are facing. It is only *after* Hutter reads the book on vampires that he is attacked. Both he and we can now fully experience the horror and fear involved in that attack, the doors that we try to keep shut open of their own accord to allow the horror to enter; the tension builds as the horror approaches slowly, inexorably.... But in the midst of Orlock's attack, Murnau (*not* following what will one day become a formula) cuts to Ellen, roused from her sleep by her psychic sensitivity to the attack on her husband. And, like Hutter, she too enters a state between life and death – she sleepwalks almost to her death, nearly plunging off the balcony. And again, she is roused from her stupor by the vampire's attack thousands of miles away. Seemingly by sheer psychic will, she interrupts Orlock's attack on Hutter. Orlock slowly turns from Hutter and begins to make his way to his new victim – Ellen. In this way, Ellen has sacrificed herself to save her husband, for now the vampire hunts her. This section of the film concludes with a recapitulation of the ignorance of the Western tradition in the face of vampiric evil. As the doctor examines Ellen, he concludes, “A harmless blood condition.”

Later we see Orlock's ship powerfully sailing across a roiling sea. We cut to Hutter struggling with his horse to cross a small stream. This nice intercutting reflects the power of the two characters to cross a body of water – one powerful, one weak. This is repeated with Orlock moves freely about the ship while Hutter struggles among the trees to make his way to the monastery where he will be nursed. While Hutter is nursed and strengthened by nuns, Orlock nurses and strengthens himself on the blood of sailors.

If we are willing to see Orlock as a symbol of sexuality, the type of sex he represents surely threatens the structure of patriarchal society. He “bites” both men and women; he affects women, so they desire his “bite,” and so on. But his disturbing influence goes far beyond the domestic boundaries of sexuality – his disturbs society to the core. He brings the plague that causes the town to become dysfunctional. He thus rips society to its core – sex, business, social structure. Whatever Orlock represents, his threat is very deep, very powerful.

The role of the female lead is also problematic in *Nosferatu*. There are two major ways of interpreting her role. On one hand, she is a strong female hero who consciously decides that she is the only one who can rid society of both the vampire and the plague by sacrificing her life. She does this as a result of her own intellectual activity, that is, reading the book on vampires. She doesn't ask permission of the men around her; and she is not helped by them. This is a strong-minded independent woman who saves the world. On the other hand, we can see her as the romantic extension of men's desires. She sacrifices herself for her husband, to rid him of his (perhaps homosexual) involvement with Orlock. Rather than the men killing Orlock, it is fitting in a patriarchal society to use women as disposable cannon fodder in the ridding of those that threaten patriarchal control over the sexual situation. Is she punished by death for daring to invite another man into her bedroom and thus violate her marriage vow to her husband. Orlock is far more in love with her than her husband – he dies for his love – and Orlock also spends far more time with her in bed than does her husband. The contrast in temperament between the flitty Thomas and the serious Ellen is striking – I cannot imagine Thomas as Ellen's lover, yet I can easily see a previously human Orlock in that position. For those that don't read German, the embroidery Ellen is working on just before she invites Orlock to her bedchamber reads, "Ich liebe Dich," "I love you." Love is the strongest power in the mystical German film.

While Expressionism began in the decade earlier, post-World War I Germany, from about 1917 to 1932, known as the Weimar Period, is artistically very important to Expressionism. In part because Germany lost the war and in part because of a serious economic depression, the art works of this period were perhaps the blackest works yet produced. In painting, this movement was characterized by a perception of art as coming from an "inner necessity," often shaded with compulsive or mystical overtones. Artists were fascinated with death, decay, and the physical, moral, and psychological degradation of human beings. This was combined with the belief that line and color of themselves can express emotions. Expressionism of the Weimar Period can be divided into primarily three groups, and I highly recommend that you take a look at a few of these

paintings before watching *Nosferatu*. You will find that almost any of these painters could have been consultants on the design of the film. (I feel rather guilty about the following dry list of artist's names, but it is important to realize that European film makers have always been influenced more by current art movements than their American counterparts, and thus knowledge of the art world contemporary to the film is intrinsic to understanding the film itself.) The first group of Expressionists, whose leaders were Ernst Ludwig Krichner and Emile Nolde, is known as Die Brücke and was active in Dresden, and later in Berlin. The group was characterized by expressive subject matter and a jagged formal approach that reminds one of German Gothic architecture. Other artists in Die Brücke were Erich Heckel, Otto Müller, Max Pechstein and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. The second Expressionist group developed in Munich and was known as Der Blaue Reiter. Its members were Vasily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, August Macke, Alexej Von Jawlensky, Paul Klee, and Lyonel Feininger. A third group arose in Austria, headed by Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka. German Social Realism developed out of Expressionism after World War I. The three major figures were Käthe Kollwitz, Otto Dix and George Grosz. (About this same time, 1916-18, by the way, Edvard Munch in Norway made a painting called *Vampire*.)

Expressionism appeared in film making because the filmmakers were, of course, not insensitive to the artistic revolutions swirling about them. It is not coincidence then that the films of the German Golden Age (and especially *Nosferatu*) owe much to the artistic environment in which they were born. Using the tenants of Expressionism, German filmmakers in an era of silence used mood, tone, and aura as the central expressive modes. Claustrophobia, depression, exhaustion, and dread are very common feelings in these films. The language of the film was a visual one; in fact, the best of these films required but few title cards. The camera now becomes a subjective observer to the action. But we are not seeing through the eyes of the camera, as in American films, rather we are feeling through the camera a visual equivalent to what the characters are experiencing, often unconsciously.

With what we have seen in the last two parts, we could expect that with Expressionism's interest with death, decay, degradation, claustrophobia, and dread, artists were naturally led to an interest in the supernatural and the uncanny. Films followed. During this time, horror films included the first Frankenstein film, Paul Wegener's *The Golem* [1914 and remade in 1920], Paul Leni's *Waxworks* [1924] which features Jack the Ripper and Ivan the Terrible, and Paul Wegener's *The Student of Prague* [first made in 1913, then in 1926 by Henrick Galeen and again in 1936 under the Nazi regime] in which a man sells his soul to the devil. Yet the key film of this period is often identified as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* made in 1919. Expressionist painters (Herman Warm, Walter Röhrig, and Walter Reimann) were hired to make *Caligari's* fantastic sets, in which even shadows were painted onto the walls. However, despite its visual brilliance, it is not a very subtle film. It begins in the normal world with a man reciting his experiences. Because he is insane, all his flashbacks are presented in wonderfully distorted Expressionist sets. However, there is little transition from the world of the sane to the world of madness – we go from “here” to “there” in a single cut. For this reason, we are always left outside, looking in; we are left to ruminate in our minds rather than to become emotionally involved. In comparison, Murnau's *Nosferatu* is a far more subtle film. Murnau begins in the normal world and slowly draws us into the world of vampires and insanity, and we go along for the ride without even realizing it (I will outline some of the ways he does this). We experience far more closely the Expressionist themes in *Nosferatu* than in most other Expressionist films of the day.

Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror was the first filming of the vampire myth made popular by the publication of Bram Stoker's gothic romance, *Dracula*, only a few decades before. At the heart of the Expressionism of this film, and any vampire film to follow, is the character of the vampire or nosferatu – in this case, Graf Orlock. “Max Schreck” – the name of the actor listed as playing the role of the nosferatu – means “most frightening” in German. It is (according to some sources) a pseudonym for the well-known German actor Alfred Abel. Ranked among the most famous of German actors (Emil Jannings, Conrad Veidt, and Werner Krauss), he appeared in films like *Metropolis* [1926] and *L'Argent* [1928]. In the early 30's, he directed three films of his own. To his

unique characterization of the vampire belongs much of the success of *Nosferatu*. (An homage to Alfred Abel appears in Tim Burton's *Batman Returns* [1992]: the vampiric businessman intent on draining Gotham City of all its electrical energy is named “Max Shreck.”) Max Schreck’s vampire is a walking dead, devoid of personality, an almost heartless and soulless killing machine. On this score his more recent reincarnations are best seen in both the TV mini-series and the theatrical version of *Salem's Lot* [both 1979] and in the German remake of the original, *Nosferatu, the Vampire* [1979]. Physically, the *Nosferatu* figure clearly projects and personifies an internal ugliness. His face is rat-like and immobile (the one exception to this facial immobility will become very important in our analysis of his sexuality); his fangs are not canines but incisors. His fingers extend into claws (clearly predicting the knife-fingers of Freddie Kruger in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series in the 1980’s.) When he moves, we can almost hear the rattle of bones and the scraping of dead flesh. The contrast between *Nosferatu* and the vampires that follow him – the Byronic, tragic, partially sympathetic, suave, sexy, debonair seducers/lovers like Bela Lugosi or Christopher Lee who steal a woman's heart before stealing her blood – couldn’t be greater. His only flaw is some remnant of human feeling that has survived his centuries of death. We see this in his attraction to and psychic connection with Ellen. Despite this Achilles' heel, he is still one of the most chilling figures ever to grace the screen.

Despite his overwhelming screen presence, Count Orlock is not alone the generator of the horror expressed by this film. Horror is manifest in many ways, often by substitutions and insinuations rather than direct vision: the plague ship sailing itself into the harbor, the bare walls of the castle, the rats swarming into the city, the strange movements of the vampire himself, and the trick photography used to emphasize the gulf between the normal and the supernatural during Harker's ride to the castle. I now want to take a closer look at some of the techniques used by Murnau to make this film worthy of its subtitle: *A Symphony of Horror* and then return once again to the analysis of the meanings contained in this film.

Let us now take a look at a few of the scenes in *Nosferatu* and see how they reflect the Expressionist mood in Germany in 1922 and, much to the credit of Murnau and his associates, extend these ideas far beyond what had been done before.

The titles introduce death and plague and immediately cast a pall of gloom on the whole film. The very first scene we see a church steeple looming large in the foreground, a symbol of orderliness and justice, all that is holy and clean. Thus, it is even more horrifying that terrors that will take place will happen in the shadow of that church. We first see Hutter finishing dressing and looking at himself in a mirror. As would be expected, the man is concerned with the outer aspects of the world – his clothes and appearance – and rarely looks beyond that. On the other hand, we first see Ellen playing with a cat, the ancient symbol of feminine mysteries. This clearly delineates the two personalities: Hutter will be oblivious to what is going on around him, never believing beyond what he can see. By contrast Ellen will be sensitive to the mysteries of the inner realm, both her own and that of the world. Hutter picks flowers for his wife Ellen as a romantic gesture of his love for her, clearly a very romantic gesture. However, as soon as he enters the room, this romantic mood is put into questions with a very strange movement – he walks almost straight toward the camera, something that is “just not done” in 1922. The way his body looms out at us breaks the romantic mood and puts us directly in touch with the film's Expressionist tendencies. After an embrace and a kiss, Hutter gives the flowers to Ellen. Crestfallen, she can only think of the flower as dying. Thus in the first few minutes the film clearly establishes a conflict between romanticism and expressionist idea. We next see perhaps one of the simultaneously innocent and ominous scenes in the film: Hutter on his way to work, moving almost symmetrically down the center of the screen meets a friend. The “friend” steps out of the shadows, stops him, and, out of the blue, tells him that, “No one can escape his destiny.” He then leaves stage left. A truly strange encounter.

This strange harbinger enters the screen from the right side as if bearing the truth – or at best a message of, ultimately, some glad tidings. We will have to see about this, for at the level of the text of the film we can see little more than horror in store for Hutter. Hutter

leaves the scene, excitedly on his way to his office. The strange man follows in the same direction – truly, Hutter’s destiny is following him.

Before Hutter arrives at the office, we are given a private introduction to his place of work. We see Knock, the real estate agent, perched on a stool too tall for practicality – probably an homage to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which features very similar furniture and also associates distorted furniture with madness. The suspicions generated by the odd furniture are immediately confirmed when we see Knock leering madly over an absolutely insane letter comprised of a mixture of alchemical, astrological and simply fabricated symbols – clearly unintelligible to any sane viewer.

In a scene that is both very brief and symbolically masterful, the relation between Knock and Hutter is clearly established. Knock is on the left – the side of evil – while Hutter is on the right – the side of good. As if this weren’t enough, Murnau positions his camera so that Hutter is against a white background while the evil Knock is backed by blackness! In a Faustian temptation to Hutter, Knock offers riches, “You could make a nice bit of money.” He also mentions – in what Hutter assumes to be a metaphor – that it might cost him a little blood. One of the signs of Knock’s insanity and viciousness is that he can so glibly disguise literality as metaphor. This distortion of meaning continues throughout the film, both verbally and visually.

Knock’s insanity is further seen in his description of the wreck outside his window as, “a handsome house.” (With *Nosferatu* and many of the early *Dracula* films I have always been struck by how these films reflect the Depression-era economics: basically, they are stories of the apt punishment of greedy and dishonest real estate agents. Perhaps these are the lawyer jokes of the 1930s.)

Hutter’s farewell to Ellen clearly shows that the two of them perceive the world at different levels. He is concerned with the outer world of money and business. She, on the other hand, is sensitive to an inner, mystical world to which he will never have access. Yet she will ultimately raise her spirituality from within to encounter and save the

physical world from destruction. He sees his trip as a road to fortune; she sees it as a fear-filled road to hell. Ellen, in her worry and grief, retires to the home of their friends – shipbuilders. This seems an appropriate refuge for a mystical woman: a place where devices are planned to plow the unconscious (for which the ocean is a common symbol). Hutter takes his exit from London on a horse, riding toward the lower left corner of the screen in the same direction and identically repeating the movement of the man who pronounced that no one can escape his destiny.

Once on the continent, things change considerably for Hutter. Now, Murnau has photographed Hutter both inside various houses and outside, yet the tinting does not change. This is quite unusual for films of this era. I believe that he was trying to convey to the viewer an unconscious sense of the stability and unchangeability of Hutter's life. Once he reaches Europe, however, all this changes. We are struck by the brilliant, blood-red sunset that greets both him and us as the introduction to Transylvania – the land of phantoms. This is followed by full tinting: blue for night, brown for candle-lit interiors, and so on.

Sunset is followed by an episode that has been repeated in many vampire films: the tourist “knows better” than the locals. Naively confident in the knowledge and the ways of the city, Hutter ignores the freely offered warnings. Throughout the 1980s (the era of the slasher film), this formula has been repeated almost endlessly in films like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1996], *Friday the Thirteenth* [1980], *Deliverance* [1972], *Straw Dogs* [1971], and *The Hills Have Eyes* [1977], with a variety of outcomes. But typically, the locals are right, and of course the city folks ignore them. One of the essences of horror films is that normal people do stupid things (would you go exploring up those creaky stairs after discovering 20 mutilated corpses on the ground floor of a creepy house?). In *Nosferatu*, Murnau's populist values are clear: Hutter finally discovers the truth about the vampire from the book he picked up at the rustic inn (I have always wondered about this – does the typical Transylvanian tavern have books about vampires in their rooms in the same way that Motel 6 has Gideon Bibles?).

Hutter's plunge into the world of phantoms is symbolized by the changing nature of the space around him, specifically his room at the inn. His spaces are getting both plainer and more complex. Compared to his home, the walls are now bare of flowered wallpaper, but have acquired numerous niches. The surfaces are getting plainer but are gaining in complexity and depth. This will be continued, drastically, when he reaches count Orlock's castle where space almost disintegrates.

Hutter's entry into Orlock's castle is justifiably considered one of the greatest accomplishments of horror cinematography. After he leaves the inn, the carriage travels from right to left, from goodness toward evil. These movements begin in diagonal, both toward us and away from us, so that the right-to-left movement is not terribly obvious. But once Hutter crosses the first bridge, the movement is parallel to the screen and quite obvious. Not one movement of the carriage on which he arrives is to the right, except for its exit after leaving him stranded in the middle of nowhere. Again, moving from right to left, Hutter crosses a second bridge. Hutter is met by a hearse (!) filmed so that its movements are twitchy and erratic, as if scurrying like a very large rodent toward its lair. In one sequence, Murnau shows us a negative print of the film – the normal composition of light and dark tones is reversed as if reflecting the moral values of the world into which Hutter is being drawn. Once at the castle, Hutter crosses the third bridge, and all hope is lost.

I stress these bridge-crossing scenes because of their symbolic import. Typically, crossing a bridge is used to symbolize the entry into a new and usually unfamiliar world. We find this symbolism common not only in fairy tales but in innumerable films from, for example, the 1924 *The Lost World* to the 1991 *Silence of the Lambs*. It is a powerful and primal symbol that seems to be a permanent fixture in the vocabulary of visual artists. However, Murnau doesn't just let it go at that. The most important number in fairy tales is three – just think of all the threes in children's stories. So when Hutter crosses *three* bridges, we know that things have *really* changed for him and that now he's *really* in trouble.

During his initial meeting with Count Orlock, the scene where Hutter is posed against a white background and the evil character (now Orlock) against a black is repeated. As with Knock, this gives us considerable symbolic information about the two.

The fractionation of Hutter's space continues with the checkerboard floor in Orlock's castle. Now Hutter is completely surrounded by bits of black and white - and the film has gone to great lengths to show us exactly what that means.

The scene where Hutter cuts his thumb and is attacked by Orlock is quite complex. Many people report a sense of physical disorientation while watching it, and there is very good reason for this. Hollywood early established a tradition of photographing conversations in a manner that retains the audience's sense of orientation regarding the two people. We always know where we are in relation to them. This is done by keeping the camera on one side of the line connecting them – the sight line – and never crossing over it no matter which participant of the conversation is being photographed. This “rule” was well established and known to Murnau since he conforms to it rigorously in his previous films. During this scene between Hutter and Orlock, that sight line is crossed twice, and the resulting confusion is clearly felt by the viewer and clearly reflects Hutter's own feelings.

Orlock's interest in Ellen's photograph is simply interest in her neck. We immediately assume him inhuman, devoid of any feelings beyond his lust for blood. However, he does display an esthetic within that narrow range of interests – he sees Ellen's neck as “beautiful.” Almost as a plot to get access to that beautiful neck, Orlock immediately decides to take the house opposite Hutter ... and Ellen.

The film begins in a distinctly romantic mode, both in the compositions we see on screen and the subject matter of what is taking place. As the film progresses, however, we see a slow disintegration into Expressionist design – angles, shadows, and fractionated space. Almost the first time we see him, Hutter moves jarringly into the camera breaking the two-dimensionality of the image. This conflict between two- and three-dimensional compositions continues throughout the film. For instance, Hutter and his wife are almost

always seen as three-dimensional. In contrast is Hutter's conversation with the real estate agent that looks very stagy and two-dimensional. We later come to suspect that the real estate agent is in collusion with the vampire and thus connected with death and, by implication, two-dimensionality. Later, during Hutter's trip to Transylvania, the compositions slowly begin to disintegrate. They slowly move from Romanticism – neat proportions and S-shaped curves – to Expressionist angles and imbalances. For instance, in Hutter's home we see the regular pattern of wallpaper behind him. This represents the regularity, repetition of his life from which he presumably takes comfort. The wall of the Transylvanian hotel room in which Hutter stays is studded with niches that break up what would normally be a flat, blank wall. This slow closing in and fractionation of the surfaces surrounding Hutter is complete when he comes to Orlock's castle and stands in the middle of its checkerboard floor. Like the checkerboard that symbolizes it, the castle is the meeting of dark and light, a place where games of life and death are about to be played out. This compositional slide from Romantic and normal into Expressionist and abnormal is seen throughout the film.

The same transfer from the Romantic to the Expressionistic is also seen in the subject matter. For instance, when her husband picks flowers for her as a romantic gesture of his love, she converts this Romanticism into Expressionism by seeing, quite presciently, the flowers as images of death.

Since the camera does not move very often, Murnau uses a whole bag of symbolic tricks to make the film exciting. For instance, in the first close-up of the conversation between Hutter and his boss, the backgrounds clearly tell us who is who: Hutter against a white background is on stage right, and thus good, while the agent is both stage-left and on a black background and is bad.

Like all great myth structures, the vampire myth didn't spring out of thin air. It must have some basis in "fact." This takes on two phases, first is the fear of death and the second is a fear of the return of the dead. In the first case, fear of death is the lowest between two groups of people: those that believe in religion very strongly and those that hold no

religious beliefs at all. Fear of death is highest in those holding normal religious beliefs, that is, belief seasoned with bits of doubt. Most religious belief systems include an after-life, and thus the belief that life does not end with the physical death of the body. From this we can conclude that the vast majority of people fear death and, at the same time, believe that life doesn't end with death. Combining these beliefs feeds the corollary belief and fear in the return of the dead. There is considerable historical evidence in various burial customs to support this view.

Many burial practices contain elements that could be interpreted as devices to prevent the return of the dead (like Dracula). One common practice was to chop the corpse into pieces and bury them in different places. Perhaps the most famous example is William the conqueror (1027 – 1087 C.E.) whose heart was buried in Rouen Cathedral, his entrails in the Church of Chalus, and his body in Saint-Étienne, in Caen. Some Neolithic cultures buried their dead securely bound by ropes to prevent their return. This may have been the basis of the Egyptian practice of wrapping the corpses in great lengths of gauze (which had nothing to do with the embalming process itself). Even cultures as old as 50,000 B.C.E. believed in an afterlife and buried with their corpses food, tools, household items, gifts, and in extreme cases even animals, servants and wives, all to make the dead comfortable in the “other world” and therefore prevent a temptation to return to “our world.” In an area of Bali, the corpses are buried far outside of the village. During the funeral procession, the corpses are spun about violently to get them so dizzy that they won't be able to find their way back. In Post-Talmudic Judaism, it is believed that the dead are capable of harming or helping the living according to The Zohar. Christianity has parallel beliefs. Saint Gregory (330-395 C.E.) wrote that the body and the soul cannot be separated completely. In Islamic burial ceremonies the two big toes of the body are tied together, and, according to the Mishkat (V, 6), the dead body is as conscious of pain as a living one. Our own burial customs, when put in this context, may seem the most primitive of all. We nail our corpses in strong wooden boxes to prevent their escape. We then bury these boxes so deep that it would be impossible for the corpse to dig out.

Finally, we place a heavy stone over the burial place to again prevent escape (our current tomb and “head” stones are direct descendents of Neolithic burials under large flat – in

those days – horizontal stones). All these practices contain clear elements of a great fear of the dead returning. What could be the origins of this fear? Does it too have a physical origin? I believe it does.

Seeing a corpse move while obviously dead would certainly tend to blur the border between life and death. And corpses, until very recently, would often move about. Before embalming, corpses would decay. One of the most common symptoms of this decay would be formation of gasses inside the body cavities. The build-up in pressure would often cause to corpse to move, it was not unusual for a corpse to even sit up. In the Islamic world, for instance, the corpse is *expected* to sit up and answer questions posed by Munkar and Nakir, two black angels with blue eyes, regarding faith during life. Needless to say, these movements would tend to cause the observer to question the distinction between life and death.

I believe that not only did this cause philosophical speculation, but also a search for a method releasing the gasses from inside the corpse and put an end to these problems. Perhaps the easiest way to release these gasses would be through a hole in the chest cavity, one that could be conveniently made with a stake. I believe that this observation – that corpses wouldn't move after being staked – contributed to the aspect of the vampire myth that deals with staking. Perhaps the sound these gasses made when the pressure inside the body was release account for the moaning sounds ascribed to vampires when staked. While the idea of staking a vampire to ensure its permanent death doesn't occur in *Nosferatu*, it does occur in enough vampire films to make it, for a contemporary audience, part and parcel of the vampire myth.

At the time of its origin in the novel, in the late 19th century, the modern version of the vampire was a very political creature. What is gone from Murnau's version in *Nosferatu* are the strong political points made in the Stoker novel. The same cultural imperialism is present in the novel that we have seen in the myriad of Tarzan films in the United States, only the country of origin has changed. In the novel, basically the British go to Europe and fix things (where in Tarzan the British or Americans went to Africa and fixed things).

This is simply an extension of the British Empire into the world of the mystical. At the turn of the century, Britannia ruled the waves *and* what dwells in the unconscious beneath those waves. Hegemony extends beyond the grave.

The novel became an instant best seller and the stage-plays and films that followed were very popular. This rise in the popularity of the vampire myth in the 20th century should be no surprise when viewed as a political statement, especially when we realize that vampires are always oppressors. The early twentieth century was marked by a great jump in the activity of many social and political movements directed toward equality and justice – the feminist movement, the unionism movement, the spread of representational democracy, the socialist movement. This is just the opposite of what the vampire represents: inequality, domination and submission, life taking. But exactly what this means is a little difficult to pin down.

There is always a great degree of ambiguity in the identification of a film watcher and the characters portrayed on the screen. At one moment we are identified with the hero, the next with the villain. Thus, depending on whom we identify with at that instant, the vampire myth takes on several possible political meanings. At one level, the vampire represents all the evils that these social and political movements were working against. Extending this idea we can discover vampiric elements in many villains – like the Sheriff of Nottingham in the recent version of *Robin Hood – Prince of Thieves* [1992], who is clearly an economic vampire. As mentioned previously, Max Shreck of *Batman Returns* [1992] is a technological vampire bent on sucking all the electrical power from Gotham City. However, if the viewer identifies with the vampire – and this is certainly possible with the later vampire films with their sexy Bela Lugosis and Christopher Lees – the politics of the film changes radically. Perhaps this identification leads to an expression of a backlash against these social and political movements in preference to the repression and subjugation of an earlier, more conservative day.

It seems reasonable to me that in Germany of 1922 these elements would be eliminated – especially after losing World War I. By moving the home base from Carfax Abbey and

London to Bremen, Murnau eliminated from the vampire myth all aspects of international conflict. He was thus able to concentrate on other aspects of the myth structure. Yet any film made in the decade after Germany's disastrous defeat in World War I cannot avoid these associations. Certainly, it is easy to see Cezare, the somnambulist of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as a German soldier blindly going off to war under the brutalizing command of an insane charlatan. Similarly, it is easy to see the vampire of *Nosferatu* as draining Germany of its soul while draining the blood from the German people.

Vampires and sexuality. At this time in America, Gay and Lesbian lifestyles are being redefined almost daily. Thus, it seems fitting that we reexamine *Nosferatu* in sexual terms because, as I shall show, it, along with many of its fellow vampire films, contain many references to gay and lesbian sexuality in addition to heterosexuality and bisexuality. First, I want to deal specifically with *Nosferatu* and later consider its implications for vampire films to follow.

Germany after World War I was a unique place politically, socially, and artistically. Among the various social experiments going on in Germany at the time, Berlin had become a center for sexual exploration. It was the world capital of the homosexual and lesbian community – both on and off the screen. Both lesbians and homosexuals were a staple in screen characters – perhaps the most famous, and most obvious, example is the lesbian in love with Louise Brooks in *Pandora's Box* [1928]. *Mädchen in Uniform* [1931] is only a little less obvious. The attitude of the film toward these sexual preferences is “nothing special,” both seem accepted as the norm. Both Christopher Isherwood (on whose writings *Cabaret* is based) and W. H. Auden wrote extensively about their experiences in the Berlin of this period. To sum it up briefly, available there was anything and everything – period. I go into this in such detail because *Nosferatu*, and all vampire films to follow, have a strong sexual component. These range from the bisexual vampire in this film all the way to the hermaphroditic vampire in *Little Shop of Horrors* [1986].

Lesbian vampires are rare. The most common are in *Dracula's Daughter* [1936] and *The Hunger*. *Dracula's Daughter* is in some ways more interesting because Hollywood's self-censorship under the authority of the Hayes Office allow nothing to be shown, but everything to be implied. And implications take hold of the imagination in much deeper ways than demonstrations. Countess Zaluska prefers “biting” or “sucking” women to men. She sees this as a disease she has inherited and wants to be cured – to obtain “release.” What is very revealing is that instead of seeking a physician to cure her “disease,” she approaches a psychiatrist! Of course, homosexuality at this time was considered a mental disorder. What is most strange about this film is that the psychiatrist is a rather weak man himself, in most respects barely male – in comparison to other male film heroes of the day. He is constantly cared for by women: his is driven from place to place by women, his bow tie is always fixed by women. Yet we feel him to be rather virile. I believe this is because of the symbolism we see on the screen at his introduction: The camera floats down from the sky – the dwelling of the male gods – and focuses on a very large, tall, and very phallic chimney. We immediately cut to the good doctor fondling his very large and phallic shotgun. With all this masculinity he would be the one to cure the countess of her lesbian (or at least bisexual) tendencies. That he does not is both expected and surprising. Surprising because the hero doesn't triumph over the “disease” in the manner of the typical Hollywood hero and expected because this particular “disease” is incurable.

The bloodsucking takes place in a man's bedroom and perhaps the ugly, shriveled, ashen little man with the pointed nose and ears is the dark, shadowed side of everyman's carnal lusts toward women. The sexuality of *Nosferatu* is quite different and far more horrifying.

A continuing characteristic of much vampire lore is that it exaggerates the differences between the masculine and the feminine. Men become more aggressive, yet sexier. Women become more passive, yet more powerful. Thus, the vampire was ideal subject matter for the German artistic community to explore in this era.

This was also a time of great interest in the feminist movement in Germany. The photographer August Sander made a study of the “social types” – doctors, artists, boxers, beggars, students, and so on. When he photographed a secretary, most people today mistake her for a man in her pants and man's shirt. Women at this time commonly began to smoke cigarettes and, heaven protect us, that most Freudian of all phallic symbols, cigars. In films too, we see Marlene Dietrich wearing men's clothes. This general social attitude was clearly reflected in the way women were portrayed in films. This is especially true of *Nosferatu* where we see a strong woman take on a vampire single-handedly without the help of men. But we must put this in the context of the sexuality contained in the vampire film before exploring it further.

In this type of atmosphere, I think it is reasonable to see what sexual components there are in *Nosferatu*. While I would never claim that is all there is to this film, I think that uncovering these aspects gives the film more depth and further helps us appreciate the time it reflects. I will try to show that there is a clear parallel between the vampiric act and the sex act. The search, in the context of a vampire films, is even more appropriate, for all vampire films have a heavy sexual component as we shall see over the coming weeks. As we look at our five films, we will see evolving of concerns that reflect both the passage of time and the cultural geography of the making of the films.

I was always struck that Ellen is more masculine looking than her husband, Thomas. Count Orlock is first attracted to Ellen through her picture - he comments that she has a beautiful neck – and then to her husband. Could Orlock, in this aspect of his character, represent bisexuality? If so, then we have a clear parallel between the vampiric act and the sexual act. I believe this is true, and we will find it most strongly in its heterosexual nature in the 1931 American version of the vampire myth – *Dracula*. But in *Nosferatu*, the sexuality is placed further below the surface, primarily because the Count Orlock character has no personality – his is one of the best representations of the living dead yet put on film, he is a killing machine with no emotional restraints. Orthodox Freudian might see the bald, swollen head of Count Orlock to be a phallic symbol and, I think in this case, they might not be too far off the mark.

Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror (Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie Des Grauens) [1922].
Directed by F. W. Murnau. Photography by Fritz Arno Wagner. Set Design by Albin
Grau. Screenplay by Henrick Galeen (unofficially based on the novel *Dracula* by Bram
Stoker). Originally released through Prana Productions, Berlin.