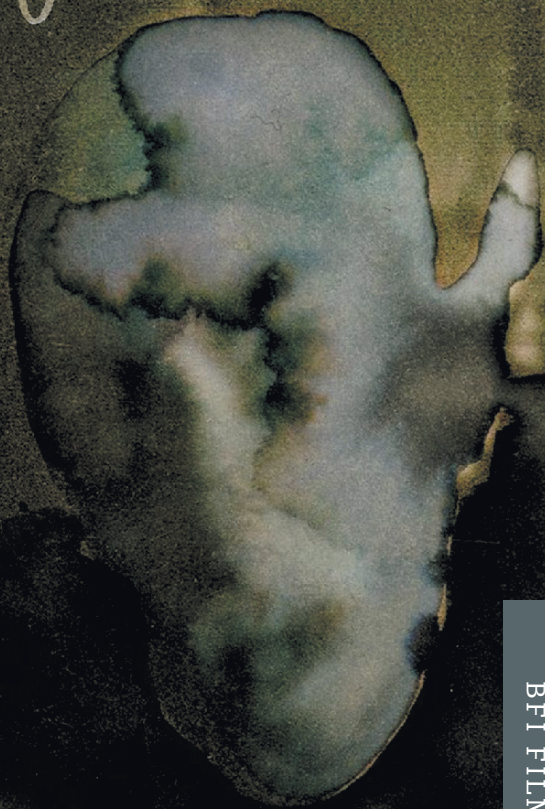


NOSFERATU

EINE SYMPHONIE DER GRÄUEN



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KEVIN JACKSON

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Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens

Kevin Jackson



To Sir Christopher Frayling 'The van Helsing *de nos jours* ...'

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Other published sources are recorded in the endnotes.

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Finally: this book is a happy by-product of almost thirty years of delightful conversations about cinema, vampires, the occult and all manner of other recondite matters with my dear friend Sir Christopher Frayling, to whom it is dedicated with admiration, affection and gratitude.

KJ
June 2013

Introduction

Nosferatu is a magnet for superlatives. Pauline Kael, who summed up its prevailing mood as ‘superbly loathsome’, declared that ‘this first important film of the vampire genre has more spectral atmosphere, more ingenuity and more imaginative ghoulish ghastliness than any of its successors’.¹ A. O. Scott, a film critic for the *New York Times*, spoke for countless others when he called it ‘the first great vampire film’. In 2001, Roger Ebert (who died as this small book was being written: RIP) said that ‘The best of all vampire movies is *Nosferatu* ... Its eerie power only increases with age. Watching it, we don’t think about screenplays or special effects. We think: this movie believes in vampires.’ A German critic, Andreas Kilb, wrote that ‘No later horror film has ever out-done the horror’ of its image of the death ship gliding into Bremen.² The film historian Angela Dalle Vacche noted, correctly, that ‘No other film about vampires ... has received such weighty critical attention.’³

And the superlatives continue to pile up even when the film is not being considered primarily as a horror movie. Robert Desnos, the Surrealist poet, once called it ‘the most beautiful film ever made’.⁴ Perez suggested that it is ‘perhaps the greatest of Weimar films’ which ‘endures as one of the most resonant and unsettling responses that has been made in art to the death that inescapably awaits us’.⁵ *Magazine Littéraire* once called it ‘le premiere film culte de l’histoire’ – the first-ever cult movie.

As with the film, so with its director, F. W. Murnau. For Lotte Eisner, Murnau was ‘the greatest film director the Germans have ever known ... He created the most overwhelming and poignant images in the whole German Cinema.’⁶ Werner Herzog, who revered Eisner, agreed with her view. *Nosferatu*, he believes, is ‘the greatest of all



Albin Grau's poster for the 1922 release of *Nosferatu*

German films',⁷ a 'masterpiece' by a director who is the equal of Griffith, Pudovkin, Buñuel and Kurosawa. Stan Brakhage, not entirely sympathetic to Murnau, none the less calls him 'perhaps the greatest story-teller Cinema has yet fostered'.⁸ Frank Hansen, who worked with Murnau, recalled that:

He knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted perfection and each finished film was the result of meticulous care. He brought to the cinema a culture, a knowledge of production, a sense of artistic beauty and of lighting which until today have known no equal.⁹

And Thomas Elsaesser notes that Murnau is generally agreed to be 'German cinema's most exquisite Romantic poet'.¹⁰

Such examples could probably be multiplied into a whole book, but the upshot is plain: *Nosferatu* now enjoys an all but unassailable status as a classic. This is a little surprising, not simply because horror films are sometimes treated with snobbish disdain, but for a number of less obvious reasons. Apart from provoking a wildly enthusiastic response from the Surrealists in Paris, who immediately adopted Murnau's vampire as one of their own, most of the early reviews outside Germany were lukewarm to poor: in New York, audiences were reputed to have been snoring their way through the projection. When it was shown in London by the Film Society, the programme note sniffed that it combined 'the ridiculous and the horrid'.¹¹ Even in Germany, where most of the reviews were excellent, it found only a small audience, lost money and drove its production company into bankruptcy within a matter of weeks. Then Florence Stoker, the widow of the man who wrote its unacknowledged source novel *Dracula*, won her law suit against the producers and had, so it seemed at the time, all prints and negatives destroyed.

Of course, like a vampire, *Nosferatu* rose again¹² – though not, at first, very high. Its reputation more or less dissolved until the end of the 1940s, when Siegfried Kracauer's much-discussed 'psychological history' of pre-war German cinema, *From Caligari to Hitler*, recovered the film from neglect and attested to its prophetic quality as a carrier for German national nightmares. Count Orlok, he suggested, was one of the tyrant figures, like Lang's Dr Mabuse, who prefigured Hitler. 'The German soul, haunted by the alternate images of tyrannic rule and instinct-covered chaos, tossed about in gloomy space like the phantom ship in NOSFERATU.'¹³

But the real turning points in *Nosferatu*'s critical reputation came with Lotte Eisner's fine study of Weimar cinema, *L'Écran Démoniaque* (1952, revised 1965; translated into English as *The Haunted Screen* in 1969) and then her monograph *Murnau* (1964, translated 1973). Eisner, who disagreed with many of Kracauer's contentions, made a brilliant case for the artistic excellence of several

films by Murnau: she said of *Nosferatu* – an argument that seemed perversely ingenious in its day, but is now a commonplace – that this film of hideous sights is also rapturously beautiful:

He films the fragile form of a white cloud scudding over the dunes, while the wind from the Baltic plays among the scarce blades of grass. His camera lingers over a filigree of branches standing out against a spring sky at twilight. He makes us feel the freshness of a meadow in which horses gallop around with a marvellous lightness ...

In a film by Murnau every shot has its precise function and is entirely conceived with an eye to its participation in the action. The momentary close-up of a detail of billowing sails is as necessary to the action as the image preceding it – the high-angle shot of the current sweeping away the raft and its sinister cargo.¹⁴

She credits Murnau, that is, not with a conventional (and facile) eye for the picturesque, but with an almost mystical vision of landscape, seascapes, architecture and animals as the essential components of his work of supernatural art. (Both Kracauer and Eisner cite a potent phrase from the German-Hungarian Béla Balázs, who wrote in an early account that the film is swept by ‘glacial draughts of air from the beyond’.¹⁵)

In the wake of *The Haunted Screen*, commentary on the film began to proliferate. By and large, it was only specialist writers like Eisner, with privileged access to film archives (in her case, the Cinémathèque Française in Paris, where Henri Langlois kept a print of the 1926 French version of *Nosferatu* among his treasures), who had a chance to make up their minds. In the USA, most viewers knew it only from chopped-down versions shown late at night on television, or from stills published in *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and other magazines aimed at baby-boomers with ghoulish tastes.

So it is only in the last couple of decades that, thanks to the labours of archivists and film restorers in different countries,¹⁶ we

have been able to see adequate, let alone more or less complete (and correctly tinted)¹⁷ versions of the film. Though the likes of André Breton and Robert Desnos caught on while Murnau was still alive, most of the people who love the film first encountered it in quite recent years.

At this point, it would usually be the custom to state that the power of the film has remained undiminished. This would not be entirely honest; and even those who consider the film a masterpiece would usually concede that it is not a flawless masterpiece. Much of the acting (especially that of Granach as Knock) is embarrassingly overstated or simply unconvincing. Some of the special effects – especially the accelerated motion of Nosferatu's coach – now seem more comical than frightening, especially to younger viewers, or at least those younger viewers who are innocent of most silent films. Much the same can be said of the vampire's make-up. Words such as 'silly', 'corny' or 'dated' are sometimes just.

But not always. Given a degree of suspended disbelief, the vampire and his actions continue to be chilling; as has often been said, Orlok seems far more convincing as a horrific corpse than any other member of the undead in cinema history. His first approach to Hutter at night-time in the castle can still frighten and disturb; as can his appearance – brilliantly staged – on board ship, or the dreadful sight of his face staring with blank malice and hunger from his window in the ruined house in Bremen.

And Eisner's ardent evocation of the film's intense beauty at certain points grows more convincing with the years. Some of the visions of land and sea threaten to up-stage the horrors; others, like the shots of horses being stalked at night, or the lowering skies, or – above all – the *Empusa* entering dock, combine beauty and terror to a degree that has seldom been rivalled.

Beauty and terror are at the heart of what makes *Nosferatu* a classic film, if by 'classic' we mean something that is not safely dead and tucked away in the dictionaries of cinema, but still has potency and life – here, the unsettling life-in-death that has been termed 'the

uncanny'.¹⁸ *Nosferatu* can still enthrall a sympathetic audience when screened, and continue to haunt long after the final frame.

It is large; it contains multitudes: the 'convulsive beauty' adumbrated by the Surrealists, Balázs's 'glacial terror', Kracauer's social and political dimensions, Eisner's highly cultivated artistry ... and much else. The film has also been read as a coded commentary on Murnau's status as an outsider – he was gay at a time when the sexual laws of his country were Draconian – and, fancifully, as a pure exercise in camp, whose central character is not 'Max Shreck', but another Max: Murnau's theatrical mentor Max Reinhardt.¹⁹ In one version of this fantasia, it is Murnau who plays *Nosferatu*; in another, *Nosferatu* himself.²⁰

Nosferatu has been seen as a self-reflexive film, one that plays with metaphoric links between cinema and vampirism. (All its actors are now dead; but they come back to life when the film is projected or played.) Small wonder, as the novelist Anne Billson said,²¹ that Murnau's film invented the convention that vampires vanish in the daylight: so do films, which can only thrive in the dark.

In the following chapters, I will elaborate on these topics and possibilities, and hope to add at least one other, seldom discussed ingredient to an already heady mix: the film's origins in German and international occult societies, and, above all, the important part played in its development by the shadowy figure of Albin Grau, who smuggled in references to occult masters from Athanasius Kircher to Paracelsus, like Orlok smuggling his earth-laden, rat-infested coffins into Bremen.

Let us begin with the most dreadful of the events that quickened *Nosferatu* into being: World War I.