

Document Citation

Title	The monster looks better than ever
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Source	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Date	2007 Nov 18
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	Calendar, p.E17
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Nosferatu - eine symphonie des grauens (Nosferatu the vampire), Murnau, F. W., 1922

A SECOND LOOK

The monster looks better than ever

Kino International releases a digitally restored 'Nosferatu' with the original score.

By DENNIS LIM
Special to The Times

"NOSFERATU," F.W. Murnau's unauthorized adaptation of Bram Stoker's "Dracula," is often called the first vampire movie. It is without question the first surviving vampire movie, even though it faced the threat of extinction not long after its 1922 release.

The filmmakers had neglected to secure the rights from the Stoker estate — instead they simply changed the location (moving the story from England to the German Baltic coast) and the names of the characters (most notably Count Orlok in place of Count Dracula). In 1924 Stoker's widow sued for copyright violation and won; the negatives were recalled and destroyed but copies of the film had by then circulated widely enough to evade the reach of the German court.

"Nosferatu" turned out to be Murnau's first big success (most of his earlier work is now lost). One of the masterpieces of silent cinema, the film has been in the public domain for some time and as a result has had multiple home-video incarnations (almost all struck from battered, murky prints). Kino International's new two-disc set, out on Tuesday, is billed as the "ultimate edition" and not without reason. The version featured here is the latest digital restoration, completed last year and supervised by Murnau scholar Luciano Berriatúa. This is also the first edition to use Hans Erdmann's original score, long thought lost and only recently reconstructed.

Despite being considered a landmark horror movie, "Nosferatu" has little to do with the scare tactics that have come to define the genre. Less frightening than haunting, Murnau's film conjures a persistent atmosphere of dread and decay, thanks in part to Max Schreck's immortal performance as Orlok. A startling contrast to the now dominant image of Dracula as a suave sexual predator, Schreck's cadaverous Count, with his sunken cheeks, rodent fangs and talon-like fingers, has a grotesque, even subhuman quality. This vampire doesn't turn his prey into bloodsuckers, but he stays true to the Greek root of his name, "nosophoros," meaning carrier of disease. Nosferatu arrives in the hero's hometown with a cargo of dead sailors and pestilent rats, the very embodiment of the Black Plague.

Stoker's vampires famously cast no shadow, but Orlok does — and to striking effect. "Nosferatu" is a cornerstone of German Expressionism, the Weimar-era style that thrived on skewed compositions, stylized acting and the dramatic interplay of light and shadow. The shot of the Count's hunched silhouette ascending the stairs as he approaches his final victim is one of the most iconic in film history; a short while later, he looms over the sacrificial maiden in aptly incorporeal form, his emaciated claw seen only in shadow as it closes in on her heart.

Murnau's innovation was to combine Expressionist techniques with location shooting (a rarity at the time), resulting in a potent and often eerie blend of the natural and the unnatural. The director, who went on to make two other silent-era greats, "The Last Laugh" and "Sunrise," came to "Nosferatu" as something of a hired hand. The film's prime instigator was its producer and art director, Albin Grau, who designed the look and drew the storyboards. An accompanying documentary on the

DVD offers some insight into this enigmatic figure, an occultist who was friendly with the British writer and mystic Aleister Crowley.

"Nosferatu" opened the floodgates for decades' worth of Dracula-themed movies and continues to exert a certain necrophiliac fascination. Werner Herzog remade it in 1979 with Klaus Kinski in the Schreck role. Jim Shepard's 1998 novel "Nosferatu" is a fictionalized biography of Murnau, most vivid when it imagines the making of "Nosferatu." In a similar vein, E. Elias Merhige's "Shadow of the Vampire" (2000) riffs on the long-standing urban myth that Schreck was actually a vampire. (Willem Dafoe earned an Oscar nomination for playing Schreck, opposite John Malkovich's Murnau.)

Best among the curious "Nosferatu" follow-ups, though, is the Canadian director Guy Maddin's "Dracula: Pages From a Virgin's Diary" (2002, available on DVD through Zeitgeist), a rhapsodic filmed ballet, faithfully adapted from Stoker, scored to Mahler and filtered through the language of silent melodrama. In a sense, it's the ultimate tribute to "Nosferatu" — a movie that could have been directed by Murnau himself.



Photofest

FRIGHTFUL: Max Schreck was the Dracula-like Count Orlok.