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NOSFERATU, EINE SYMPHONIE DES GRAUENS
(Nosferatu, A Symphony of Horror)

Directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau. Adaptation by Henrik Galeen from the novel, Dracula, by Bram Stoker. Photography by Fritz Arno Wagner. Music by Hans Erdman. Art direction by Albin Grau. Produced by Prana Film-GmbH.

Max Schreck (Count Dracula/Graf Orlok), Alexander Granach (Renfield/Knock), Gustav von Wangenheim (Harker/Hutter), Greta Schröder (Mina/Ellen), G.H. Schnell (Westenra/Westenkra), Ruth Landshoff (Lucy/Lucy), John Gottowt (The Professor/Professor von Helsing), Gustav Botz (the town doctor/Dr. Stevens), Max Nemetz (Captain of the "Demeter"/Ship's Captain), Wolfgang Heinz (First Mate/First Mate), Albert Venohr (Sailor/Sailor); Guido Herzfeld, Hardy von François and Heinrich Witte (Transylvanians).

When all was ready, Van Helsing said:— "...Friend Arthur, if you had met that kiss which you know of before poor Lucy die; or again, last night when you open your arms to her, you would in time, when you had died, have become nosferatu, as they call it in Eastern Europe, and would all time make more of those Un-Deads that have so fill us with horror."

— Bram Stoker, Dracula (Chapter XVI)

Murnau, in the ten films he had directed previous to NOSFERATU, had essayed the horror mode several times, notably in two ventures starring his favorite actor Conrad Veidt: SATANAS (1920), a three-part film dealing with the Devil as Tyrant, Prince and Dictator, and DER JANUSKOPF (1920), an adaptation of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, with Veidt in the role John Barrymore was appearing in at the same time on the American screen. It thus seems strange at first viewing to note the casual way Murnau and his scenarist Henrik Galeen treat the acknowledged masterpiece in the literature of vampirism, Bram Stoker's Dracula.

(First, to allay some of the confusion those familiar with the novel may encounter on viewing the Museum print, the shuffling of characters' names from the novel to the original version to this subtitled one should be clarified. The blood-sucking Count is known variously as Dracula (novel and MOMA print) and Orlock (Murnau). The young man sent to Transylvania is Jonathan Harker (novel, MOMA) or Hutter (Murnau). In the novel Harker leaves his fiance Mina and marries her upon his escape from Castle Dracula; in Murnau's version she was his wife and her name was Ellen, while in the subtitled print she is called Nina. Harker-Hutter's employer is Peter Hawkins in the novel, but Renfield in the MOMA print. There was a character called Renfield in the novel, an insectivorous lunatic who was Dracula's first victim in London. Murnau's Renfield is a combination of Stoker's Hawkins and Renfield, for he begins the film as an estate agent and ends it, dead, in an asylum. (In other respects, the prints are identical.)

There are other disconcerting factors, however. The fabulous and meticulous sets for which the German film industry was renowned are missing in NOSFERATU; the poverty of the independent producer forbade it. Murnau's control of actors and of the moving camera developed later in his career: some of the performances are interestingly stylized, but others (those of von Wangenheim and Fraulein Schröder) show lack of discipline and direction; and the number of moving camera shots can be counted on the fingers of Orlock's hand. The film also seems to miss the opportunity of exploiting an audience's fear of the dark, in the manner of superb exercises in terror like INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS; if ever a film demanded darkness, it is NOSFERATU, but it is missing. What is probable, though, is that the original made extensive use of blue tinting, which is missing from this version.

If the creators of a horror film can produce the proper atmosphere at the outset, the film has a quick hold on success. Those who prefer Tod Browning's DRACULA (starring Bela Lugosi, 1931) to NOSFERATU often cite the opening scenes of each. In the sound version, Karl Freund's cameras glide soundlessly around Castle Dracula observing the vampire and his wives awake and rise from their graves; Lugosi greets his human visitor (to heighten the confusion, in this version the junior solicitor is Renfield!) with such memorable phrases as "I am — Dracula," "Listen to them — the children of the night. What music they make!" and "I never drink — vine"; and the decor complements the Count nicely in both splendor and decadence.

NOSFERATU opens with a kind of satanic litany to the vampire ("Nosferatu! That name alone can chill the blood! Nosferatu!...") ascribed to a historian of the German port of Bremen, whither Murnau has moved the setting. (It was due to copyright difficulties that the names and place were changed, as well as the time: Stoker's novel was set in fin-de-siecle London, but the film story takes place in 1838.) Following this admirably suggestive, if nonvisual, opening, Murnau introduces his hero, Harker-Mutter; and his bride, Mina-ElLEN-Nina. This sequence inspires little confidence in Murnau's direction: in eight shots there are two mismatched (poorly edited) pairs; the acting is both crudely stylized (Nina, in the hoariest Griffith tradition, is shown to be Good and Kind by a shot of her playing with a kitten) and overdone (Gustav von Wangenheim plays Jonathan as a combination of Doug Fairbanks and Tiny Tim, athletic and unctuous).

When we are introduced to Renfield, Jonathan's employer, we begin to sense one of the basic differences between Stoker's (and, to a lesser degree, Browning's) idea of Dracula and Murnau's. Stoker contrasted the light, middle-class, sane world of London with the dark, aristocratic depravity of the vampire demi-monde; in NOSFERATU, there is no contrast: everyone is grotesque. True, Jonathan and Nina represent light, while Renfield and Dracula symbolize darkness; but both Jonathan and Renfield are manic characters, and both Nina and Dracula are depressive. Thus it is natural for Jonathan to be employed by Renfield, and for Dracula to focus his interest on Nina; the relationships are perfectly complementary.

Another way to account for the grotesqueries of the characters is to call them the extreme outward manifestations of their personalities, or, more correctly, of their types. Murnau's characters hold to one of the oldest movie commandments: The Good Are Beautiful; The Beautiful Are Good. Garbo, for instance, can do no wrong because she is so stupendously beautiful. She creates her own morality. It becomes not only aesthetically but morally correct for her to leave her drab husband and find someone whose beauty approaches hers. Griffith's heroines had to be more beautiful than his villainesses so that the hero would not be unduly tempted and because the audience would more easily appreciate the moral of a story in which Good was more attractive than Evil. In Murnau's own masterpiece, SUNRISE, the heroine's beauty is emphasized, through many close-ups, as superior to the sultry good looks of the Woman from the City. Murnau's Dracula follow this principle, but Stoker's and Browning's does not. Lugosi-Dracula is charming, in both the handsome and the hypnotic senses. Schreck-Orlock is what he looks like: a verminous ghoul. Lugosi is Jekyll, Schreck is Hyde; Lugosi is Dorian Gray, Schreck is the picture. (Curiously, Lugosi appeared in Murnau's 1920 adaptation of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and, some years earlier, under the stage name "Aristid Olt," in a Hungarian film version of The Picture of Dorian Gray.)

We may also understand Murnau's apparent indifference to the vampire genre if we become familiar with the progenitor of Stoker's Dracula and other lycanthropological novels: Thomas Preskett Prest's 220-chapter, 800-page epic, Varney the Vampire, or A Feast of Blood. Published in 1847, exactly one half-century before Dracula, Varney presented quite a different portrait of a blood-sucking artist. In an essay on the literature of the subject, Charles H. Collins describes Varney: "The image of the vampire in his original metamorphosis — the abhorrent, charnel, nocturnal revenant, sans charm, sex magnetism, and subtlety; a creature associated with the grave and possessing an elemental evil; a figure whose countenance is repulsive to look upon, yet whose eye holds hypnotic powers; a horror feasting upon human blood, returning to the grave before sunrise — endows Varney with its classical virtue." This is the creature Murnau calls Nosferatu! He is not the gracious, grandiloquent nobleman of Stoker's early pages, nor the imperious but nonetheless impressive Count Lugosi (who parlayed the Dracula role into superstardom, receiving hundreds of letters each week — and, Lugosi emphasized, 97% from women!). Lugosi's animal counterpart was the bat, vicious but graceful. Schreck-Dracula is associated with rats to the extent of looking like one. There is nothing of the Lugosi love-bite in Schreck's blood-sucking. It is charnel, not carnal.

So, just as Murnau, in adapting Faust to the screen, based his treatment, not on Goethe or Marlowe, but on the medieval legend itself, so did he disregard much of Dracula to lift his characterization of the vampire from Prest's Varney. (Fritz Lang, in the same year as NOSFERATU's release, went to the original source for his NIBELUNGENLIED.)

By making his vampire the personification of pestilence, Murnau gained for his film the immediate impact of revulsion — and the scenes of Dracula rising from his coffin, carrying it through the streets of Bremen, and, especially, feeding on the silhouetted body of Mina, are immediately and lastingly revolting — but sacrificed another important aspect of vampire lore: eroticism.

The vampiric act itself is a demonic version of the sacrament of Eucharist in the early and medieval Church. In the former, the vampire drinks the blood of others to give himself life; in the latter, the communicants drink the blood of Christ to give themselves life. Both Jesus and Dracula fulfill a primal wish of man: to live after death. The difference is that the vampire is a parasite on human life, whereas Christ is, literally, the Host. Christ personifies sacred love, Dracula profane. If the Beautiful and Good heroines of silent films are Christlike (and, in that they would rather face death than sin, they are), the villainesses, the Women from the City, are Draculalike — which may have been why they were called vamps. The person who radiated sensuality rather than purity was considered to be evil, to be infected with a contagious disease that necessitated his rapaciously feeding on the pure by stealing her virginity. The disease would thus be passed on to the "host," who, now bitten by the deadly leech, is compelled to infect still more pure victims.

The realization that the act of vampirism is a chilling metaphor for the act of sex evidently evaded Murnau until the end of NOSFERATU when, throwing centuries of vampire lore to the winds, he creates chills in his audience by showing Dracula's shadow creep up a flight of stairs to Mina's room and enveloping Mina, who greets the beast fearlessly (in order to break his spell and end the plague he has caused by his arrival in Bremen) and allows him to suck her blood. It is only in this sequence that Dracula/Orlok becomes at all human or male, only then that his rodentoid needs begin to approach lust. But Murnau avoids photographing any foreplay in this sexual act. Throughout NOSFERATU, the film-maker has evinced a strange predilection for documenting the act of vampirism: a 20-second shot (one of the longest in the film) of rats crawling out of a ship's hole on their way to infecting all of Bremen; another long shot of a venus fly trap ("the vampire of the vegetable kingdom")

ensnaring and swallowing an insect; one of "a polyp with claws"; even a shot of the spider spinning his web for the unwary fly. His treatment of the act of vampirism is brutally straightforward, like the inescapably documentary quality of a stag film that begins in medias res. The shot is almost completely dark; there is a tiny lamp at the right of the frame. At first nothing is noticeable but the line of Nina's body, who looks to be lying asleep on her bed. But following that line we discover, by her head, a crystal-ball shaped object: Dracula's hairless head. Murnau cuts to another action, but returns twice more. This sequence far outstrips in horrifying effect the blood-sucking scene in the Browning version, in which the foreplay is shown, but the climax omitted. (Film-makers have become more explicit in recent years, of course, and horror specialists are no exception. In the 1962 Italian film Slaughter of the Vampires, written and directed by Riccardo Nauri, not only is the climax shown — including penetration — but the female victim reacts with orgasmic groans, clutching hands, and the plea "Don't ever leave me!")

Stung, ironically, by Nina's willingness to be his hostess for the sake of love, and, perhaps, fatally infected with a drop of Nina's humanity, Dracula staggers away from her at sunrise and, in a shot that evokes the fear and pity of Margaret Hamilton's death by melting in THE WIZARD OF OZ, he dissolves (or, rather, fades out) into a weightless pile of dust that can be seen only in the morning's first sunbeams. Siegfried Kracauer wrote that "It was [scenarist Henrik] Galeen's idea to demonstrate through this telepathic phenomenon the supernatural power of love." A similar scene had occurred earlier in the film: when Jonathan was about to be attacked by Dracula, Nina, in Bremen, awoke and called his name; both Jonathan and Dracula responded to this call, and the vampire withdrew. This motif recurred in Murnau's SUNRISE: in that film, the Janet Gaynor character cried out as George O'Brien was about to strangle her, thus saving him from his own demon. In both films it is at sunrise that evil is crushed.

Murnau's mastery is quite evident in this last quarter of the film (the four fairly evenly distributed parts are: 1. Bremen and the preparations for Jonathan's journey; 2. In Transylvania and at the Castle; 3. En route from Transylvania to Bremen; 4. In Bremen), and the experience of it nearly obliterates the memory of the earlier technical inadequacies, some of which can be ascribed to the lack of time (for rehearsals) and money (for sets, equipment and superior technicians). Despite these handicaps, Murnau does manage some excellent effects. The grotesqueness of Bremen, as if the town itself anticipates Dracula's arrival and effect, is emphasized through a shot of the house in which Dracula will reside: it slants, just perceptibly but quite ominously. Dracula's carriage moves with jerky speed (described as such in the novel, which quotes the line, "For the dead travel fast"), to achieve which Murnau used a "one-turn-one-picture device" (Kracauer's phrase). The carriage travels through a forest of white trees canopied by a black sky; Murnau used a negative print. In the third part, Murnau ties together, in the fashion of both OF INTOLERANCE and the Stoker novel, five strands of story: Dracula's voyage, on a ship of ghouls, to Bremen; Renfield, now in a sanitarium, calling for "the Master"; Jonathan returning home; Nina, wandering the dunes and calling for Jonathan; and Van Helsing describing various carnivores in his lab. The tension reaches its peak as the ghost ship glides into the harbor, in a long, balletically spectral shot that evokes for the first time in the film, not the grotesquerie of the Underworld, but its grace. From the moment Dracula enters Bremen, artistry enters NOSFERATU; Murnau casts a spell stronger and more durable than Dracula's over the viewer who feels himself in the presence, not of a clumsy directorial hack, but of the budding Master of mise-en-scène.

Germany, 1922

83 minutes

Production

Prana Co.

Direction

F.W. Murnau

Scenario

Henrik Galeen & Murnau

Photography

Fritz Arno Wagner, Gunther Krampf

Design

Albin Grau

Based on the novel "Dracula" by Bram Stoker

CAST

Count Dracula, Nosferatu-(ORLOK)

Max Schreck

Renfield, estate agent

Alexander Granach

Harker, his clerk-(HUTTER)

Gustav von Wagenheim

Nina, Harker's wife

Greta Schroeder

Westrenka-(HARDING)

G.H. Schnell

Lucy, his wife-(ANNIE)

Ruth Landshoff

Professor von Helsing-(PROF. BULLWER)

John Gottowt

Dr. Stevens-(PROF. SIWERS)

Gustav Botz

Captain of ship

Max Nemetz

First Mate

Wolfgang Heinz

Sailor

Albert Donohr

HERZFELD

HARDY VON FRANCOIS

HEINRICH WITTE