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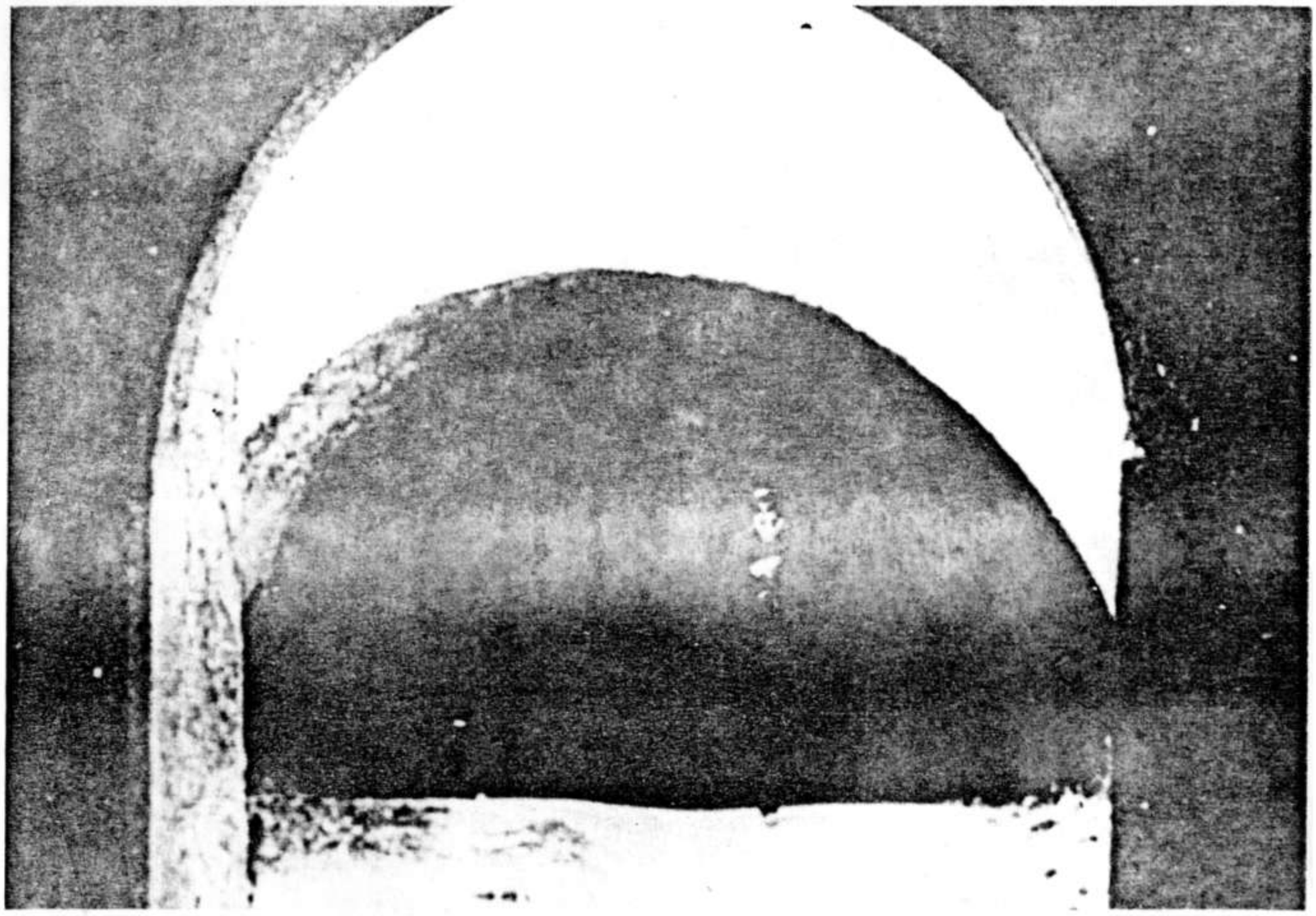

SHADOW AND SUBSTANCE
MURNAU'S NOSFERATU

MADE IN GERMANY in 1922, during the heyday of expressionist fantasy, F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* manifestly indulges the period taste for the horrific: the story is adapted (albeit freely) from *Dracula*; the vampire is monstrously conceived as the thin, repulsively bald Nosferatu, somehow suggestive of both a human skeleton and a rat. Yet, contrary to expressionist practice, the context is not of oppressively murky artificial sets. The settings are chiefly authentic: the ferocious landscape of the Carpathian mountains, the narrow streets and closely packed houses of a small town of the Baltic. The photography is limpid, almost naturalistic, free for the most part of elaborate lighting effects. Even the much-mentioned trick photography (which is in fact rather less prominent than film historians would have us believe) is of an elementary purity: self-opening doors and jerkily fast-moving carriages appear not amidst hazy shadows, but against a real, three-dimensional world brought into clear focus.

In retrospect, it is only too clear that a conventionally expressionistic film could scarcely have been expected of Murnau; that he could not have succumbed to elaborate fantasy in *Nosferatu* any more than, ten years later in *Tabu*, he succumbed to Flaherty's dogged naturalism. The natural and the fantastic are but elements of an overall design, sometimes separate and distinguishable, sometimes inextricably mingled. Neither can be said to dominate the film.

The use of natural settings may at first glance seem simply a trick, a decoration designed to render the fantastic narrative more plausible and effective. In Dreyer's *Vampyr*, for instance, the deliberately blurred natural settings remain simply a stylistic device, brilliant but not indispensable: *Vampyr* probably would not be basically changed if shot in, say, an appropriate Old Dark House. *Nosferatu*, on the other hand, is unimaginable except in natural settings. To think of it as a more or less effective rendering of a given narrative is to miss its greatest riches: its strange, impassioned poetry; its sense of mystery, of the opaqueness inherent in a world seemingly fully revealed before our eyes; its view of the world as inescapably oppressive and sinister, however natural and commonplace it may seem. Far from a decoration on the *Dracula* story, the natural world is the true protagonist of *Nosferatu*.

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Cinema, like painting, can concentrate on the rendering of solid objects, each having a specific importance and each perceived from a specifically suitable point of view; or it can take the opposite course and impose a single viewpoint on the entire visual field, the privileged object of perception being, effectively, empty space. (Most films, of course, combine the two approaches.) These two different modes may be characterised, respectively, as the cinema of close-ups (Dreyer, Dovzhenko, Eisenstein) and the cinema of long shots (Murnau, Mizoguchi, Antonioni), although these techniques are not strictly necessary for the accomplishment of one or the other purpose.*

Close-ups are the means by which, in Eisenstein's films, an object is isolated from its surroundings and perceived, from successively different angles, as possessing palpable bulk and a definite shape. Conversely, the unity of the visual field in Mizoguchi's films rests largely on his use of long shots. Yet, persistently as Dreyer brings the faces of his characters into privileged attention, only in *Jeanne d'Arc* does he actually rely extensively on close-ups. And Murnau can use a close-up —recall that exquisite shot in *Tabu* of Reri hiding behind Matahi's back as they confront the police officer—without for a moment losing sight of the rest of the visual field. It is, then, less a matter of an actual use of close-ups or long shots than of the impression created. An object, one might say, is effectively in close-up if it draws attention to itself, to a peculiar quality and meaning all its own; effectively in long shot if it becomes virtually meaningless when disengaged from the rest of the visual field.

* * *

Expressionist cinema is a cinema of objects and mists and obtrusive sets, of space obsessively filled. Murnau's cinema, on the other hand, is primarily a cinema of empty space. Signs of expressionism which appear in Murnau's films are for the most part (an exception is *Faust*) only superficial; and his best work (*Nosferatu*, *Tabu*, parts of *Sunrise* and *Tartuffe*) rather avoids them. In these films, as in Velázquez's 'Ladies in Waiting' and 'The Spinners', space becomes the central object: the space traversed during the trolley ride in *Sunrise*, immeasurably more expressive than any of the individual objects passed; the space surrounding the lovers' hut in *Tabu*, charged with the menace of a hostile world. Even the revolving door in *The Last Laugh*, often cited in the textbooks as an example of the use of symbolic objects in silent German cinema, is less prominent in itself than as a pivotal point in the space around it.

Like Velázquez, Murnau looks past the foreground and into the background; deep-focus photography, to judge from the evidence in Lotte Eisner's recent book, was employed from quite early in his career. Attention is not restricted to a sharply delimited object standing in the foreground, or even to a number of significant objects strategically placed within the frame. It is dispersed throughout the whole, throughout space; and space, fluid in nature and not likely to be contained within sharp limits, palpably extends all around the frame of the film. Murnau's compositions, his shots of details, have a certain imbalance, a deliberate incompleteness which relates them inextricably to the world around them.

With Murnau a shot is fundamentally unstable,† its structure constantly threatened, from all directions, by an encroaching outside world. The charged and restless quality of his images stems, in part, from the sense they convey both of the immediacy of that outside world and of its ineffable strangeness. The slow entrance of a ship into frame, interrupting the dance of celebration of Reri and Matahi in *Tabu*, physically marks the beginning of a sustained assault on the world within the frame, on the lovers' private world into which the world outside forces them to retreat further and further. This differs not only from the static and self-enclosed images of a Dovzhenko, but also from a director technically much closer to Murnau, Renoir, where the sense of a world existing all around the frame, far from causing instability and unrest, comes about perfectly casually. It is, perhaps, a matter of a simple difference in basic attitudes: Renoir warmly accepts the world, while Murnau finds himself hopelessly at odds with it.

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Despite their obvious differences in story and setting, *Nosferatu* and *Tabu* are in some respects remarkably alike. Of Murnau's surviving films, they are the only ones set chiefly in natural surroundings, the only ones to have been produced outside the major German and American studios. Among the films of the high silent period—when ostentatious technique was the order of the day—they are both admirably restrained. Furthermore, they are surprisingly similar in structure. Excluding the prelude in the Baltic town in *Nosferatu*, both films begin in settings far removed from ordinary experience —in one case the spectral landscape surrounding Nosferatu's castle, in the other an impossibly idyllic island of the South Seas. These remote worlds, immensely dissimilar as they are, both contain a menace. It is a menace which at first seems specifically associated with the setting, but which in fact, we come to realise, is far more fundamental. In both cases the menace expands—in both cases transported by means of a ship—to a more immediate, ordinary world. There, despite what, in *Nosferatu*, may seem like a happy ending, the menace prevails.

Yet to compare the two films in this way is to neglect not only the obvious, but also rather more significant differences. In *Tabu*, as in *Sunrise*, a fundamental polarity exists between the leading characters and their environment, a polarity in terms of which both the environment and the characters are virtually defined. In *Nosferatu*, on the other hand, the physical world almost invariably stands at the centre, an intensely charged pole lacking a balancing counterpart. The vampire himself, prominent and impressive as he is, is generally photographed from a distance—across an archway in his castle or amidst deserted streets in the quietly sleeping Baltic town—so that he appears, disturbingly, as somehow merged with the physical environment. There is, to be sure, an obvious analogy between the young married couple of *Nosferatu* and the leading characters of *Sunrise* and *Tabu*. Yet in the earlier film the couple is much less conspicuous a physical presence, the acting is of a coarse—and viewed today somewhat risible —expressionistic variety. Furthermore, in *Nosferatu*, despite various attempts (of considerable historical significance), the subjective point of view of the leading couple is never quite successfully established. The characters, then, prominently as they may figure in the original narrative, come across rather weakly in the completed film; and all the more so in contrast with the fiercely portrayed, the disrupted and oppressive world that surrounds them. Of such a world, toward which Murnau's imagination always gravitated, one finds in *Nosferatu* the undiluted essence.

If, in a film like *Tabu*, one were to respond directly to the physical environment, the result would probably be close to the paradisiacal calm of Flaherty's *Moana*. It is the peculiar poignancy of Murnau's film that, from the point of view of the lovers, nature's beauty acquires somehow a sinister quality; a quality so incongruous with what one would naturally expect that it evokes a sense of betrayal. Reri and Matahi, at the same time that they hope to attain a happiness, a harmony with nature, that never seems quite out of reach, come to feel a freezing indifference, almost an overt hostility, from the natural world.

In *Nosferatu* there is no such ambivalence. Despite its density, the earlier film has none of the dissonances of *Tabu*; its effect is of an unequivocal, an almost unrelieved blackness. The long and perfectly composed line of coffins that we see in *Nosferatu* through the young wife's window is in itself, without reference to the wife's point of view which we are supposed to share, a definitive image. We respond directly to the

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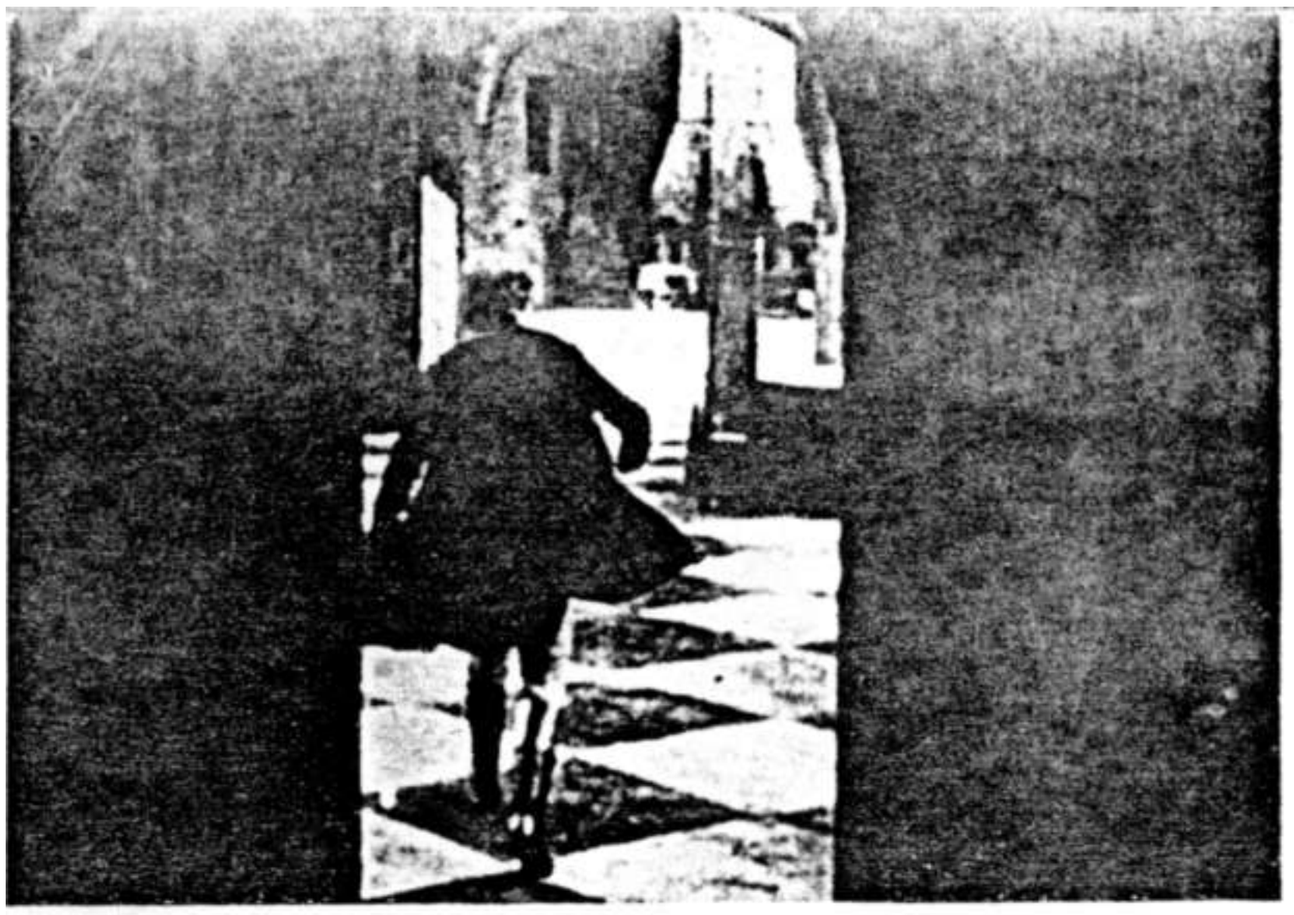
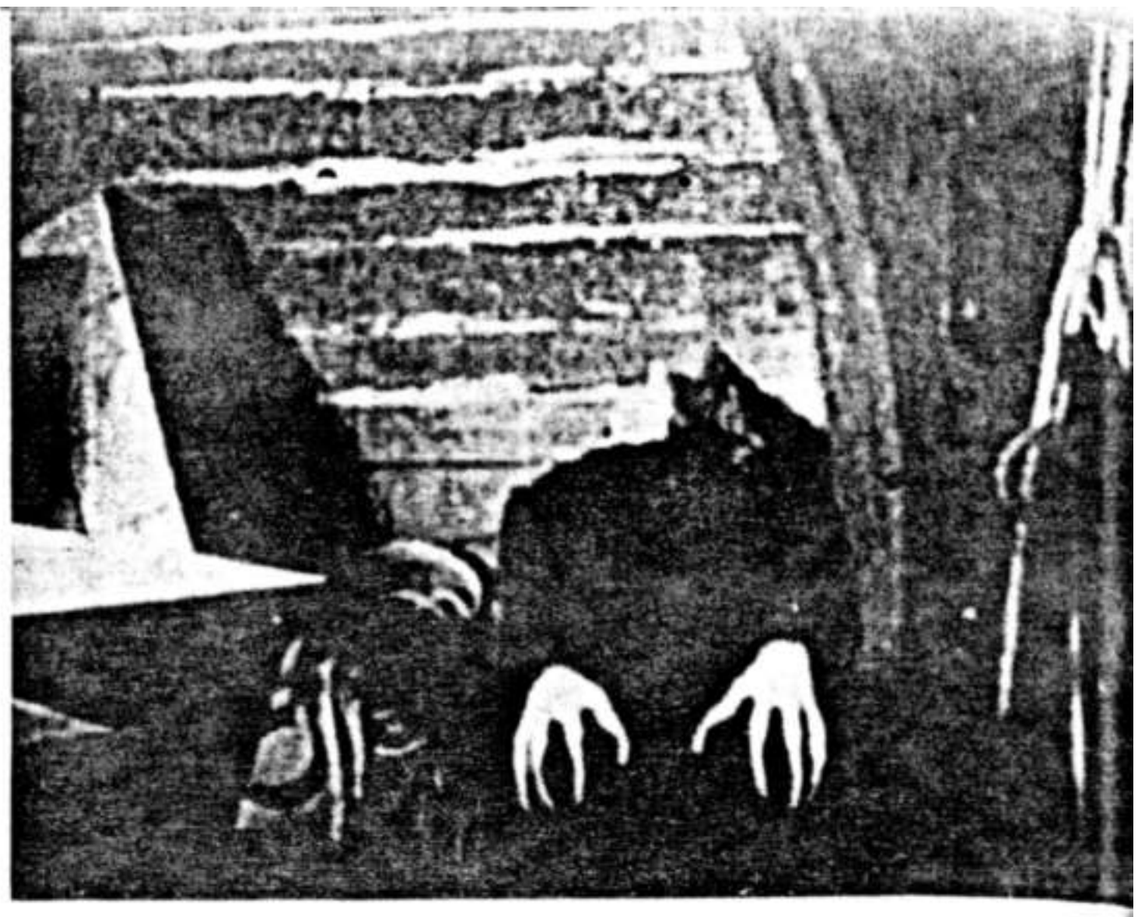
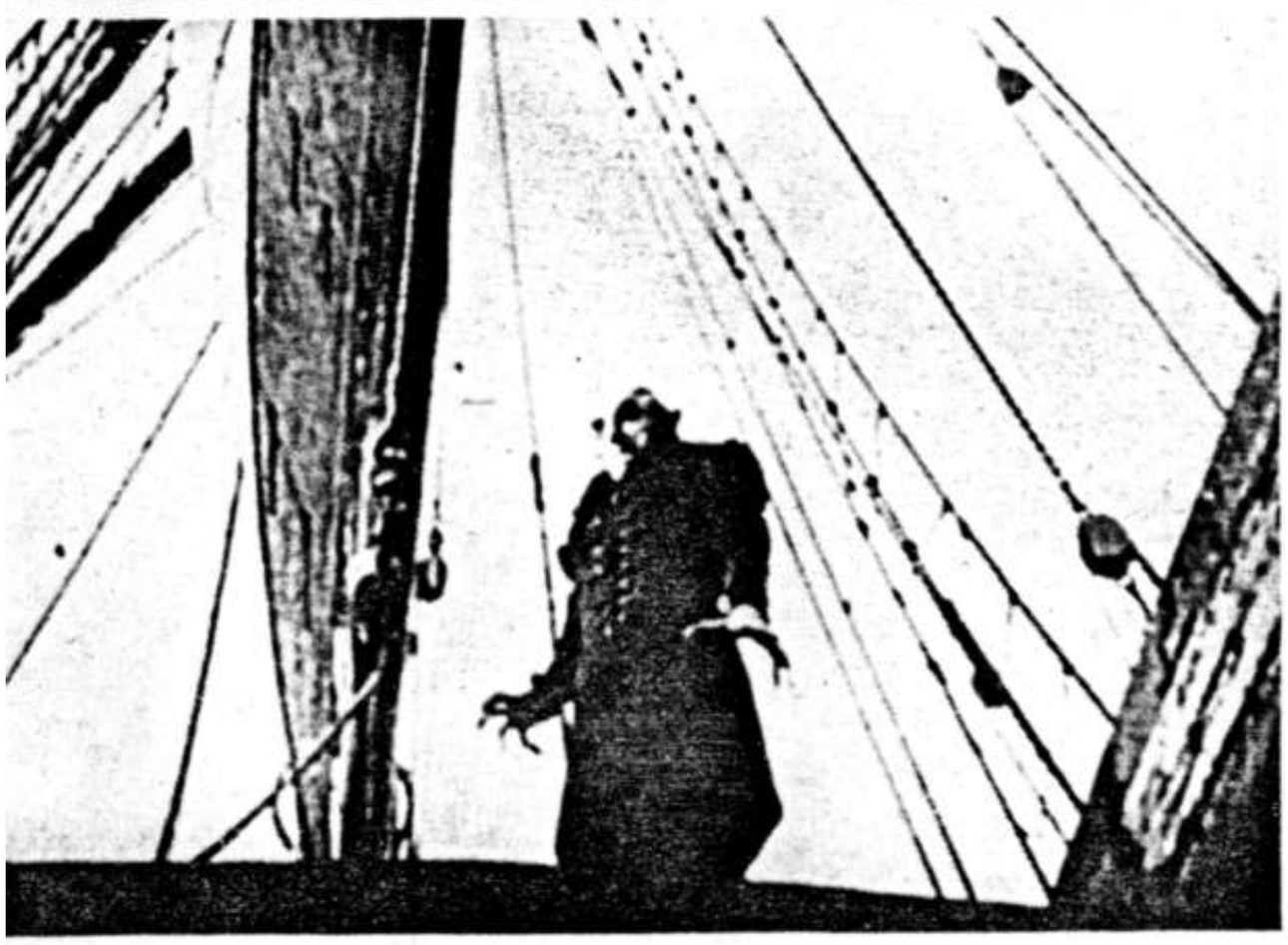
*Bazin effects a similar division when he opposes montage to spatial unity. Yet a director like von Stroheim, whom he is compelled to group with Murnau, seems clearly more concerned with objects, and with the symbolism of objects, than with space.

†Alexandre Astruc has written: "With Murnau, each image demands annihilation by another image. Every sequence announces its own end."







regularity of those patterns of death, to the quiet fierceness of that image. What concerns us here is not, as in the later films, the characters' alienation and their attempts to resist the encroachments of the world outside; it is rather the absolute barrenness, the inescapable hostility of that outside world.

* * *

Nosferatu begins with a somewhat perfunctory prelude set in the Baltic town. A real-estate agent, obviously insane, acting under the long-range influence of Nosferatu, assigns his young and only recently married clerk to transact some business in Nosferatu's distant castle. Rather surprisingly, since the trip will for months take him away from his young wife, the clerk seems very happy to go. It is then that *Nosferatu* properly starts; almost at once we are immersed in the weird Carpathian landscape. The part of the film that follows—the sequence around the vampire's castle—perhaps comes closest to the conventional horror film. The world is remote, fragmented, invested with a sinister atmosphere by very deliberate means—often by the use of trick photography and of expressionist angle shots. This part of the film, in fact, is fashioned, like the original story, after the classic nightmare plot (of which the whole of Dreyer's *Vampyr* is another version), in which a succession of bizarre and seemingly unconnected events is seen from the point of view of a journeying young man.

Where Murnau yet differs from the Dreyer of *Vampyr*, and from most other exponents of the horrific, is in the clarity of his technique, in the perfect simplicity with which he presents what are usually rather self-conscious and elaborate effects. The camera tricks in *Nosferatu* have often been criticised for their crudity. An obvious criticism, one might say, since the technical resources of *Nosferatu* are manifestly very limited; and yet it overlooks what seems to be a quite conscious refusal on Murnau's part to bridge the gap between the natural and the fantastic, to blend more acceptably the jerky motions of doors and carriages with their natural surroundings. The trick photography simply and defiantly unsettles a context of reality. The result is bewildering; and—as in the scene in which the clerk watches, from a window of the castle, the incredibly rapid loading of a carriage with earth-filled coffins—often quite effective.

The trick photography, like the odd camera angles, Murnau uses deliberately as an endistancing device. As such it becomes less and less prominent as the film moves from the remoteness of the Carpathian castle to the greater immediacy of the Baltic town. The clerk, having (literally) miraculously survived the encounter with Nosferatu, sets for home. Parallel to him, and with the same destination, a ship advances carrying Nosferatu and the earth-filled coffins. The two parallel motions, as well as various details from the Baltic town, are bound together in an intricate cross-cut structure (no doubt influenced by Griffith); a structure dominated by the recurring, massive ship; and culminating, with accumulated force, in the highly charged image of the ship's arrival in town. The clerk's journey plays only a secondary role; significantly, even as his wife awaits his return she instinctively turns toward the sea, the sea that brings Nosferatu and the coffins. The cross-cutting builds up an impressive rhythm; sometimes, one feels, at a sacrifice of meaning. Some of the details included do not seem relevant, and one especially regrets the presence of a biology class studying examples of natural vampirism. Yet it is in the context of this rhythm that Murnau succeeds in investing some perfectly familiar objects—the ship, the wind, the waves—with a quality of the supernatural; thus setting the ground for the town sequence with its indissoluble fusion of the quotidian and the uncanny.

Aboard the ship the vampire has exterminated the entire crew. It is the plague, the townspeople believe as they inspect the phantom ship that has arrived at their docks; and the plague spreads all across town. With the plague scenes the film attains, at the same time as its dramatic climax, the climax of directness toward which, from the deliberate remoteness of the early passages, it has been steadily moving. The streets and arches, the Nordic houses and pointed roofs, are unblinkingly photographed in deep focus and natural light. The small-town milieu is vividly and effortlessly captured; in a few shots a sense is conveyed both of the greyness and boredom of the town's past and of the bleakness and horror of its present. Yet, for all the increased directness, all the unyielding photographic naturalism of these scenes, something, one senses, remains elusively beyond what the camera can capture. The physical world, placed almost tangibly before our eyes, is still somehow distant, inscrutable, ghostly.

For Murnau has shot these scenes almost exclusively in long shots; long shots which at first glance would seem to reveal everything, yet leave everything imprecise; which refuse to give a clue, to isolate an especially meaningful detail, and gradually make us aware that isolated details would in any case have no meaning; which in attempting to show us the whole, show us only that the whole is outside our grasp. The devastation of the little bourgeois town, horrible as it is in itself, seems only the reflection of some horror outside our grasp—a *supernatural* horror, to be sure, and yet one which seems not extraneous but ingrained amidst the natural surroundings.

The tone is set, from the start, with the simple yet resonantly weird scene of Nosferatu's arrival in town—at night, supposedly, though as shot the scene actually conveys the impression of early morning. Tiptoeing across deserted streets, Nosferatu, who has shown himself capable of propelling ships and carriages at fantastic speeds, now politely relinquishes his powers in order not to disturb the town's sleep. The supernatural, it seems, has snugly adapted itself to the town's rhythm of living. The monstrous figure of the vampire, photographed from a distance, appears, in the greyness of early morning, uncannily to blend with the natural surroundings. Indeed, since Nosferatu does not appear, after that scene, until the end of the film, it seems as though he had dissolved into the texture of those cheerless façades.

The ensuing plague, supposedly caused by the vampire's direct intervention, seems actually, to judge by all appearances, a perfectly natural phenomenon. We may be told that the familiar mark of the vampire is found in all victims of the plague, but, except for an earlier shot of the dead ship captain, we see no direct evidence of this; and the vampire himself is nowhere to be seen. Furthermore, the townspeople, it sometimes appears, are not aware of the presence of anything exceptionally sinister in their midst. Death is received with suitable solemnity, not uncontrollable panic; coffins are carried in orderly procession; a town official calmly goes marking with a cross the houses of the dead.

And yet an unshakeable strangeness pervades those quiet and composed funeral patterns. Just as the arriving vampire yielded to the tone and quality of the small-town milieu, so now this entire milieu subtly reflects the special circumstances of Nosferatu's arrival. The coffin that Nosferatu carried with him finds a repeated echo in the coffins of victims of the plague; the town streets are still quite as deserted, quite as silent and sombre as they were on the night of Nosferatu's arrival. It is as if, almost imperceptibly, the town's sleep had turned into death. And so the town's quietness and solemnity come to appear as a sign not so much of the townspeople's composure and control over the situation as of the intangible, strangulating grip of the supernatural. Horror and solemnity overlap, at times seem almost to coincide. One cannot speak of the supernatural as a hidden presence amidst the commonplace, but of its becoming in some degree identified with the commonplace, with the very conventions and outward manifestations of bourgeois life. As always with Murnau, the surface, the visible image, unable to encompass the whole, is yet bound intimately to it. Appearances are not deceptive, they are simply opaque, inherently incomplete; and precisely by our sense of their opaqueness and their incompleteness they make us aware of the whole, aware of the invisible.

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Just as the physical world, and not any of the human characters, is the true protagonist of *Nosferatu*, so death, and not the monstrous eponymous vampire, is its true subject.

(*Continued on page 159*)

SHADOW AND SUBSTANCE

continued from page 153

Some say that the vampire symbolises death: if so, how can the film end, in abrupt and arbitrary reversal of its steady linear development, with the death of the vampire, the death of death? In fact, *Nosferatu* ends, as one would expect it to end, with the irreducible triumph of death. This is only reaffirmed by the death of the vampire—and, at the same time, by the death of the young wife who in giving herself to him causes his death. Without the film's closing sequences Nosferatu's relation to the death he supposedly brings about would remain unclear; for what strikes us most in the plague scenes is the utter impersonality, the inability to associate disaster with an individual agent.

In the splendid, underrated *Tartuffe* that Murnau did with Emil Jannings the true character of Tartuffe is not fully revealed, in his sinisterness and his vulnerability, until the scene in which he glides down the stairs to meet Elmire in her room. In much the same way (and in circumstances similar to those of Tartuffe's undoing), the true nature of the vampire is revealed fully only in the last sequence of *Nosferatu*. The vampire, as he is shown heading toward the wife's bedroom, abruptly coming out of the large dilapidated house that faces the young couple's house, is not only frightening but also, at the same time, aching, vulnerable. And upstairs, in the wife's bedroom, he becomes for the first time a mere phantom disconnected from the physical world, an impotent shadow struggling to possess the young woman's body, lecherously staying by her side until after sunrise. Daylight, which has done nothing to dispel the strangeness and horror that cover the town streets, now, through the window, kills the vampire.

A title then states that after his death the sick no longer died, and happiness was regained; yet it would be impossible for the camera to return to those streets and show them as happy again. The wife's sacrifice has been to no avail. What has vanished into thin air is merely a shadow; the substance of a hostile world is left intact.

Stills from "Nosferatu" illustrating this article have been taken from the frame by Cedric Pheasant.