



Dracula Meets the Zeitgeist:

Nosferatu (1922) as Film Adaptation

No fly-by-night film genre, the vampire film has demonstrated durable appeal for decades. Universal Studios in America successfully cloned its Bela Lugosi vehicle *Dracula* (1931) throughout the 1930's and 1940's: *Daughter of Dracula* (1936) was followed by *Son of Dracula* (1943), among others, and finally Lugosi returned as Dracula in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948). Hammer Films in Britain introduced graphic horror in color to their demythologized but ferally sexual *Horror of Dracula* (1958), an international box office success that spawned a popular series that continues today with its star, Christopher Lee. More recent essays in resurrecting Dracula have included a British TV drama and a Broadway play. Not yet released at the time of this writing is German director Werner Herzog's new interpretation of the silent German classic, *Nosferatu*. Herzog's remake should bring the whole vampire genre full circle, since the original *Nosferatu*, *Eine Symphonie Des Grauens* appears to have been the first definitive, feature-length vampire film. Produced during 1921-22, it was released in Germany on 5 March 1922, and seven years later released in the United States with the title *Nosferatu the Vampire*.

Nosferatu was a screen adaptation of Bram Stoker's popular novel *Dracula*, published in 1897. The first of many movies to be based on Stoker's novel, *Nosferatu* gave film credit to Stoker, but director Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau and scenarist Henrik Galeen used Stoker's property without permission. In an abortive attempt to evade the copyright law, they made several changes in the original. The setting of the story was shifted from 1897 England to 1838 Bremen, Germany. The names of the characters were changed, for example, Graf Orlok the Nosferatu in lieu of Count Dracula the Vampire ("Graf" is the German equivalent of "Count," and "Nosferatu" is Rumanian for "Undead").

Two striking, and related, revisions concern the character of Professor Van Helsing and the destruction of the vampire. In Stoker's novel, Van Helsing is Dracula's nemesis. Both characters

represent authority figures by being male, having venerable titles (Professor, Count), and possessing the wisdom of maturity. In the book they are antagonists, each vying to dominate the situation and the lives of the other characters. Van Helsing is conspicuously absent from *Nosferatu* so that Graf Orlok is unopposed by any male authority figure. The denouement is therefore different. The vampire is not ambushed outside and violently staked and beheaded, but with the dawn's sunlight dissipates inside a bedroom. Whereas the setting in the novel is natural (the Borgo Pass) and the agent of destruction is social (a band of men), the setting in the film is social (interior bedroom) and the agent of destruction is natural (the sun). Whereas in the novel the vampire's ultimate demise is effected by male attack, it is accomplished by feminine surrender in the film.

Why did the Germans make these significant changes? In view of these alterations, why "put the bite on" Stoker's vampire property at all? The assumption here, explaining the use above of the collective "Germans," is that the filmmaker, however strong his sense of personal vision, is never working in a vacuum, and that contemporaneous cultural factors may influence his work. Murnau may have, as a director of considerable merit, a personal vision that permeates his *oeuvre*,¹ but the particular configuration of *Nosferatu*—especially the absent Van Helsing and the new ending—can be construed as owing much to the structure of social-psychological variables operative in Germany at the time that Murnau was making his film. This will be the focus of this study.

Germany in 1921-22 was suffering through a period of real, not romantic, storm and stress. Instability was ubiquitous, a consequence of Germany's defeat in World War I and the overthrow of the traditional monarchy. The new German government was an experiment in democracy, but many officials in the Weimar Republic leaned to the political right. Similarly, the conservative military traditions were maintained in clandestine defiance of the explicit terms of the Versailles Treaty. At the same time Bolshevism was exerting an influence in Germany. Seeds of discontent took root in the economic plight of the country following the collapse of the currency. Riots and threats of riots led to the formation of popular, reactionary militant groups like the *Freikorps* in Bavaria. Siegfried Kracauer sums up the situation: "The Germans obviously held that they had no choice other than the cataclysm of anarchy or a tyrannical regime."²

Anarchy and tyranny represent, on a sociopolitical spectrum, opposite poles, somewhere between which appears democracy. Freedom (albeit not necessarily quality) of artistic expression can be dichotomized as high and low, being higher in a democracy and lower at the poles of chaos or tyranny. Further sets of binary oppositions can be similarly proposed: chaos/change/individual fights, versus tyranny/no change/individual submits. A logical option to fighting and submitting, essentially realistic responses, is escaping, including such propensities toward non-reality as mysti-

cism and fantasy.

Certain interpretations can be ventured from these relationships of antinomic pairs. Since the Germans were caught in a dilemma between fighting for change and submitting to authority, trapped in the unresolved avoidance-avoidance conflict of anarchy versus tyranny, they would be likely to seek some form of escape. The German democracy lay between chaos and tyranny, but with definite political and military leanings to the right. What remained strong about the democracy was its freedom of artistic expression. Escape and freedom of artistic expression are compatible with the German inclination toward mysticism described by Lotte Eisner.³ Historically, that is exactly what happened. According to Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, "the abortive social upheavals manifest during the immediate post-war years in Germany found more permanent outlet in the arts than in politics."⁴

The artistic movement that flourished was, fittingly, expressionism, described by Manvell and Fraenkel as "essentially a movement designed to *get away from actuality* and to satisfy the desire to probe seemingly fundamental truths of human nature and society by presenting them through *fantasy* and dramatized *mysticism*."⁵

Expressionism found a new artistic medium in cinema. Film historian Gerald Mast catalogues German films of this era into two categories: "fantastic and mystical, realistic and psychological. [The former] was steeped in the traditional German Romanticism of love and death."⁶ These were the *Schauerfilme*, or horror films. It should not be surprising to note that the *Schauerfilme*—like *Das Kabinett Des Doktor Caligari* (1919), *Der Golem* (1920), *Nosferatu* (1922)—were predominant during the early, unstable days of the Weimar Republic, but "with the re-establishment of social and economic order, the fantasy film declined and was gradually replaced by more intimate psychological dramas."⁷ Significantly, F. W. Murnau directed the *Schauerfilm* *Nosferatu* in 1922 but turned to psychological drama in 1924 with *Der Letzte Mann* (English title: *The Last Laugh*).

The 1920's German cinema inevitably reflected the anarchy-chaos dialectic. One type of film, according to Kracauer, exploited the motif of tyranny, "detailing the crimes of the sufferings it inflicted."⁸ Predictably, the *Schauerfilm* tended to approach the subject obliquely. Here the tyrant would not be identified as a contemporary figure, or even limned by a contemporary role or institution. Rather the tyrant should assume a fantastic disguise and menace the Germany of a more remote time. Hence the Prince of Darkness, the mythical *Nosferatu*, "the murderer among us" draining German lives in the safety of the past.

The apparent ineluctability of tyranny to the Germans can be seen in the absence of Professor Van Helsing in *Nosferatu*. There clearly is no benign authority figure to challenge the tyrant. The only option the film offers is to witness the vampire tyrant's crimes and submit to him. Good ultimately prevails and evil is

destroyed, not by aggressive human action, but by a combination of ritual sacrifice and mystical event. Hutter's wife Ellen (Mina Harker in Stoker's novel) personally resolves to redeem her stricken village according to the prescripton she has found in a text about vampire lore: "only if a chaste woman can fearlessly make him miss the first crowing of the cock will he disintegrate in the light of dawn." Contriving to be alone in her bedroom as a voluntary offering to the vampire, Ellen is inevitably violated, but her submission succeeds in detaining the *Nosferatu* past his curfew. The mystical power of the rising sun then purges the evil creature.

The question remains, that if the Germans wanted to express their simultaneous attraction to, and fear of, tyranny in an expressionist *Schauerfilm* about a vampire, why base it not on the autochthonous, frightening folktales for which they are so famous, but on a novel? If print-mediated literature, why should the choice be Stoker's *Dracula* and not, for example, Goethe's *Die Braut von Korinth*?

The answer to the first question may be found in the *Autorenfilm* movement which flowered one year before the outbreak of World War I. Proponents of the *Autorenfilm* asserted that film should be evaluated as the work of an author. One will immediately note a striking similarity to *la politique des auteurs* promulgated by *Cahiers du cinema* in the 1950's. But where the French looked for *l'auteur* in the film director, the Germans saw *den Autor* quite literally in the author. Lotte Eisner notes, "this is not surprising in a country with so marked a literary bias as Germany . . . The future German cinema was to owe to this concept of the *Autorenfilm* one of its main strongpoints: the 'literary scenario.'"⁹

Why the Germans filmed an English vampire story rather than one of their own, may be another manifestation of the German "compulsion of hate-love."¹⁰ This simultaneous repulsion and attraction was felt by the Germans, according to Kracauer, toward tyrants. Such a hate-love compulsion may have been extended toward the English, dating back at least to the pre-World War I rivalry between the Kaiser and his cousin King George, particularly in the needless German challenge to Britain's naval supremacy.¹¹ The Germans at once resented and emulated the English. Some of this love-hate relationship may have been retained by the government-subsidized, postwar German film industry. That German filmmakers admired the English is demonstrated by their adapting the work of Robert Louis Stevenson and Bram Stoker for the screen. That they resented them can be demonstrated in their repeated resort to piracy to avoid paying royalties.¹²

Nosferatu, the first transliteration of Stoker's novel to film, with its deletion of the Van Helsing character and its revised demise of the vampire, has been seen as an expression of the German *Zeitgeist*. Perhaps an English or American director may have seen an advantage to being more faithful to the book. An outdoor chase, an ambush, a gunfight with gypsies, a staking and beheading of a vampire certainly conjure up vivid images. By comparison, the

quick dissolve as the vampire in *Nosferatu* mystically dematerializes with the morning mist seems cinematically anemic. We have attributed these modifications not to an individual filmmaker's vision of a literary work, but to social-psychological characteristics of the contemporary German culture in which the filmmaker worked: the influence of mysticism and fantasy, and attraction-repulsion towards tyrants. Surely no subsequent English or American version of *Dracula* is so much the product or symptom of moral malaise and social-psychological *Angst*.

Lane Roth
Lamar University

NOTES

¹ For a well-known discussion of Murnau's collected work, see: Lotte Eisner, *Murnau* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1973).

² Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ., 1971), p. 88. Hereafter cited as: Kracauer, *Caligari*.

³ For a discussion of this, see: Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1969). Hereafter cited as: Eisner, *Haunted*.

⁴ Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, *The German Cinema* (New York: Praeger, 1971), p. 13.

⁵ *Ibid.* Italics mine.

⁶ Gerald Mast, *A Short History of the Movies* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1971), p. 164.

⁷ Carlos Clarens, *An Illustrated History of the Horror Film* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), p. 24.

⁸ Kracauer, *Caligari*, p. 77.

⁹ Eisner, *Haunted*, p. 39.

¹⁰ Kracauer, *Caligari*, p. 79.

¹¹ Germany's was not a maritime economy as was England's, yet Von Tirpitz strove to match the Royal Navy's dreadnaughts and battle cruisers ship for ship.

¹² Stevenson's heirs were cheated out of royalties for *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Hans Janowitz's "free adaptation" of the book for the German 1920 Lippow/Decla-Bioscop production, *Der Januskopf*.