



A Symphony of Horror

film by F. W. Murnau
Germany 1922

reader by H. J. Mathey © 2006

the story

It is 1838 and the estate agent Thomas Hutter has been asked to go to Transylvania to sell a house to Count Orlok. After having said farewell to his young wife Ellen he travels to the Count's remote castle. Here he meets the frightening, hardly human-looking, Count Orlok. They talk deep into the night and the next morning Thomas wakes up to find himself with two bite marks on his neck. Slowly Thomas realizes that his host is a vampire, the legendary Nosferatu. But it is too late. Trapped in the castle, the man cannot escape as Nosferatu comes to his room at night to suck his blood.

Meanwhile in Bremen, Thomas' wife, Ellen, is having a disturbed dream. She knows that something is wrong with her husband and calls out to him in her sleep. The Count senses Ellen's psychic connection to Thomas and turns away from his victim, deciding instead to travel to Bremen to take this woman. He buries himself in a stack of coffins filled with soil (as vampires must always sleep in the same ground in which they were buried) and sets off for Germany by boat. As he travels he brings plague and pestilence to the whole of the ship's crew, who all die, and to every port he calls at. Finally he arrives in Bremen, which then also becomes engulfed by disease.

Back in Transylvania Thomas has escaped the castle and is hurrying back to Ellen to warn her of Nosferatu's intentions. Once reunited, Ellen fears that Nosferatu will return to continue feeding on her husband to turn him into a vampire, so she tries to find a way of destroying the monster. She discovers the 'Book of Vampires', in which she learns that if a woman pure of heart sacrifices herself freely to the vampire and manages to keep him in their room until the cock crows his power is lost. Ellen decides that she will give herself up to save her husband. She entices the Count to her room, who feeds off her until dawn, at which point he simply vanishes in a puff of smoke. For a brief moment Ellen raises her head as her husband comes into her room. Tragically there is nothing he can do. Both he and the town are saved but she has lost all her blood and so dies in Thomas' arms.

the history

Let's start with a little background. In 1897, English author Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula*, the horror novel that brought centuries-old European folklore into the scientific age and gave it an alarmingly effective home in a modern urban setting.

Fast-forward to Germany between the world wars, a place and time now associated with economic turmoil, artistic experimentation, and revolutionary steps in new directions of thought and expression. Pioneering filmmakers created works that helped invent cinema as we know it today.

Directed by German Expressionist filmmaker F.W. Murnau *Nosferatu* (1922) was first in the endless string of motion picture adaptations of *Dracula*. And like the good Count himself, it's a movie that was almost destroyed forever. In this case, the fearless vampire killer wasn't Professor Van Helsing, but the elderly widow of Bram Stoker. Her weapon: the copyright laws. The problem was, you see, that Murnau and company had failed to get permission from Stoker's family to produce their film adaptation of *Dracula*. Florence Stoker was concerned about the fact that her husband's work had been plagiarized for profit. Even though Murnau changed characters' names and other details, the resemblance to the source material was obvious. So a series of legal battles ended with victory for the Stoker family. In 1925 a court ordered all prints of the film to be destroyed. That decree was carried out but fortunately, a few film-copies in private possession escaped from destruction.

the film

Hutter, a real estate employee, receives an unusual assignment from his boss, the troll-like Knock. Knock tells Hutter that a new client, Count Orlok, wishes to leave his remote castle home and take up new

lodgings nearby - in fact, Knock suggests, the deserted house across the street from Hutter's would be ideal. Orlok's letter to Knock, written in runish occult characters, and Knock's referring to Orlok as "Master" before the vampire has arrived, make it apparent that Knock is already under Orlok's influence before the events of the film even begin.

Hutter bids farewell to his wife, Ellen, who becomes the object of attraction for the blood-drinking Count. ("Your wife has a beautiful neck," Orlok tells Hutter, staring at a photograph.)

On the road to Orlok's castle, Hutter stays the night at a rural inn. When Hutter mentions Orlok's name to the inn's patrons, the resulting reaction of shock and fear extends even to the animals outside. And it's not a Bible that Hutter finds at his bedside, but a book explaining the facts about Nosferatu, the undead. While the scene educates Hutter - and us - with information that will be useful later, Hutter does not believe in what the book tells him and throws the book aside, laughing.

A carriage takes Hutter only part of the way to Orlok's castle. The driver refuses to go any farther than a small river (vampires cannot cross running water on their own). Soon, though, a coach from Orlok's castle arrives to bring Hutter to his client. Taking us from the world of the rational to that of the supernatural, this coach is no ordinary horse and driver. Riding with supernatural speed, the phantom carriage carries Hutter through dark forests. He is deposited at the castle and is met by the Count.

The story continues with some scenes familiar to Dracula fans (such as Hutter cutting his finger at dinner and his host being too interested in the resulting bloodflow). The vampire and Ellen connect psychically, which both saves Hutter's life during a terrifically creepy scene and puts her in mortal danger as the Count sets sail to become Mr and Mrs Hutter's new neighbour. The scenes on the "death ship" *Empusa* are among the most gripping in the movie. The ship gliding ghost-like into port even after its captain and crew are dead reminds us again that the *Empusa's* "new captain" is something beyond nature.

In his new city, Orlok spreads plague and death. But finally, the hunter becomes the hunted and is 'killed' by Ellen's courageous sacrifice, a victory that hangs on the fact that Hutter's wife is a 'sinless maiden'. Along the way, there's plenty that creates a creepy atmosphere: Orlok stalking Hutter in his bedroom, coming through the doorway like a nightmare seducer; the Count's skeleton clock; Orlok rising from his coffin on the *Empusa*, a scene every bit as classical as Boris Karloff's first appearance as Frankenstein's Monster; the parade of coffins through the city streets; Orlok staring hungrily from his window into Hutter and Ellen's bedroom; the vampire's shadow stalking Ellen like a disembodied force ...

the filmscript

Act I 'A Chronicle of the Great Death in Wisborg 1838'

NOSFERATU. Does not this word sound like the call of the death bird at midnight? You dare not say it since the pictures of life will fade into dark shadows. Ghostly dreams will rise from your heart and feed from your blood.

I thought a lot about the beginning and the end of the Great Death in my hometown Wisborg. This is how the story goes:

- Hutter and his young wife Ellen lived in Wisborg.

*

'Why have you killed them ... the beautiful flowers ...?!'

*

'Do not hurry, my young friend. Nobody can escape his destiny.'

*

- There was also the real estate agent Knock. Many rumours were circulated about him. Only one thing was certain: he paid his people well.

‘Count Orlok - his Lordship ... from Transylvania ... would like to purchase ... a nice house ... in our small town. You could earn a lot of money ... it will take a bit of effort ... a bit of sweat and perhaps ... a bit of blood ...

He wants a very nice, deserted house ... That house ... opposite yours. Just offer him that one! Travel quickly, travel well, young friend, to the country of ghosts.’

*

‘I am going to travel far away to the country of thieves and ghosts.’

*

- Hutter left his worried wife with his friends, the rich ship-owner Harding and his sister.

*

‘Do not worry.’

*

- The young Hutter travelled many dusty roads, but finally he could see the glowing peaks of the Karpathen. It became more difficult for the horses.

*

‘Hurry the meal - I have to go to Count Orlok’s castle!’

‘You can’t go now, the werewolf is roaming the forests.’

*

Of Vampires, Terrible Ghosts, Magic and the Seven Deadly Sins

Out of Belial’s seed appeared the vampire Nosferatu who lives and feeds of Human Blood. He lives in terrifying caves, tombs and coffins. These are filled with goddamned soil from the fields of the Black Death.

*

‘Hurry up! The sun is going down!’

‘You could pay us anything! We are not going further! We are not going! It’s creepy on the other side of the pass!’

*

- As soon as Hutter had crossed the bridge, the eerie faces, he so often had told me about, took hold of him.

*

‘I have waited for you - I have waited too long - Now it is almost midnight. The servants are sleeping!’

Act II

‘You’ve hurt yourself ... The precious blood! Should we not spend a little time together, my very dear friend? Sunrise is far away and during the day I have to sleep, my friend, I will be in a very deep sleep indeed -’

*

- With the sun rising, all of Hutter’s dark thoughts of the night were vanishing.

*

My love! My dearest!

Don’t let it anger you that your beloved is far away. The mosquitos are a real pest. I’ve got two bites on the neck, very close together, each on one side.

- The ghostly evening light again seemed to revive the shadows of the castle.

*

‘Your wife has a beautiful neck. I am going to buy the house ... The beautiful, deserted house opposite yours ...’

*

During the night Nosferatu clutches his victims and sucks their blood like a gruesome life-saving drink. Beware, so that his shadow cannot burden your sleep with horrible nightmares.

*

At the same hour:

‘Ellen! A doctor ... a doctor!’

‘Hutter!’

‘Harmless blood congestions.’

*

- The doctor described Ellen’s fear to me as an unknown illness. I know, however, that her soul had heard the call of the death bird tonight. -

Already, Nosferatu spread his wings. -

In the morning light Hutter decided to explore the horror of his nights. -

*

‘Ellen! Ellen!’

*

- The raftsmen did not know anything about the creepy load they were taking down the river.

Act III

‘Farmers took him to the hospital yesterday. They said that he plunged from a mountain yesterday. He still has a fever ...’

‘Coffins - - -’

*

- Nosferatu was coming. The danger for Wisborg drew nearer. The Paracelsian Professor Bulwer, at this time, explored the secrets of nature and its deepest links. He told me the following: The two-masted schooner, Empusa, had been loaded with soil-filled coffins.

*

‘The ship is going to sail tonight.’

*

- From this time, I am recording that Professor Bulwer explained to his students the gruesome manners of the meat eating plants. In horror, they looked at the mysterious ways of nature.

*

‘The patient from yesterday has an attack of acute mania ...’

‘Blood is life! Blood is life!!!’

‘... and this one ... a polyp with tentacles ... clear ... almost bodyless ... almost only a phantom ...’

‘Spiders!’

*

- Ellen went to the beach often, to spend time alone in the dunes. She longed for her beloved. Her eyes searched far across the waves.

*

My love! My dearest!

Don't let it anger you that your beloved is far away. The mosquitos are a real pest. I've got two bites on the neck, very close together, each on one side.

*

'No, I have to go ... home as fast as I can !!!'

*

The Plague

A plague epidemic has broken out in TRANSYLVANIA and in the ports of Warna and Galaz on the Black Sea. Young people are dying in masses. All victims appear to have the same strange scars on the neck. The doctors are unable to tell their origin. The Dardanelles were closed to all ships suspected of being plague-infected.

*

'A sailor has become sick below deck. He is delirious.'

*

- They had an epidemic on board. The first infected sailor dragged all crew with him into the dark grave of the sea. In the light of sunset, Captain and ship's mate said good-bye to their last comrade.

'I will go downstairs. If I am not back here in ten minutes ...'

*

- The death ship had a new Captain ...

Act IV

- It is hard to explain how young Hutter's poor strength managed to overcome all obstacles of the trip home - while the deadly breath of Nosferatu filled out the ship's sails. The vessel flew with ghostly speed towards its destination.

*

'I have to go to him. He is coming !!! The master is close ... The master is close ...'

*

- I wondered for a long time why it was said that Nosferatu had taken soil-filled coffins with him. I found recorded that vampires can only get their dark strength from the goddamned soil in which they had been buried.

*

'We checked everything. No living soul on board.'

*

12th July

Crew - except myself as the captain

one Helmsman

one Ship's mate

five sailors

Second day: 13th July

One sailor is ill with a fever.

Course: SSW.

Wind: NE.

Third day: 14th July

Mate acting insane. An unknown passenger is under deck.

Course: SE.

Wind: NE.

Tenth day: 22nd July

Rats in the ship's bottom. Plague threat.

'Plague threat!! Go home! Close all windows and doors!'

*

Announcement

The mayor announces that all ill or plague-stricken people should not be seen on the streets and cannot be taken to the hospital. They must remain in their houses.

Act V

- Hutter had pleaded with Ellen, not to touch the book with the faces that had frightened him. But she could not resist the strange force.

During the night Nosferatu clutches his victims and sucks their blood like a gruesome life-saving drink. Beware, so that his shadow cannot burden your sleep with horrible nightmares. Nobody can save you unless a sinless maiden makes the vampire forget the first crow of the cock. - If she was to give him her blood willingly.

'This is how I see it - every night ...!'

*

- Fear was hidden in all corners of the town. Who was still healthy? Who was already sick?

*

'I'll quickly go over ... I'll fetch Sievers ...'

*

Nobody can save you unless a sinless maiden makes the vampire forget the first crow of the cock. - If she was to give him her blood willingly.

*

- The fear-stricken town looked for a victim: it was Knock.

'They have seen him! He ran out of the house! He strangled the guard ...'

'He strangled him ... the vampire!'

*

'Bulwer! Get Bulwer!'

*

'They have caught Knock!'

'The master ... The master!'

'The master ... is ... dead.'

*

'Hutter!'

- The wonder truly happened: The Great Death ended the same hour and before the triumphant rays of the living sun the darkness of the death bird was blown away.

*

The end