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RETRO REVIEW ARTICLE

Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens (1922) and the Horrific Face of a Pandemic

By Daniel Tilsley

Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens (1922) is one of the most iconic films ever made: the horrifying figure of the mysterious Max Schreck as the bat-like monster-vampire, Graf Orlok, has seared itself into the popular collective consciousness, creating a cinematic vampire unparalleled in cinema history.

Directed by F.W. Murnau, *Nosferatu* draws on the narrative of Bram Stoker's vampire novel, *Dracula* (1897), albeit with the character names altered in order to avoid copyright laws (this failed). Dracula becomes Orlok – more commonly referred to simply as 'Nosferatu', meaning 'undead'.

My decision to review this film came from two motivations. First, I hosted a screening of the film in March (2020), as part of the University of East Anglia's popular 'Philosophers at the Cinema' programme – it was decided as far back as September of 2019 that I would host the film. This was before the outbreak of COVID-19 – and its eventual declaration as a pandemic. And that is my second reason for deciding to conduct a more extensive review of the film, for I believe that *Nosferatu* in a sense captures in an interesting way our societal anxieties about viral epidemics and pandemics. It captures the nihilism that society falls into when such things happen – when a mysterious, invisible virus defies the security of our hyper-modern lives with all of its technology.

The Film

Fundamentally, *Nosferatu* is an anti-rationalist film; that is, on a narrative and aesthetic level, it defies the conventions of reason that supposedly govern our lives – particularly, science.

Anti-rationalism is often a feature of German expressionist horror films. The most famous is, of course, *Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari* (1919), iconic for its illogical and abstract set design and general *mise-en-scene* that captures the fractured and distorted mind of a man in an insane asylum. Similarly, the horror–science-fiction epic, *Metropolis* (1925), directed by Fritz Lang, presents scientific-rational capitalism as a mechanised hell, where proletariat slaves work dance-like at massive machines, and the rich sneer down from their high modern skyscrapers.

Nosferatu is a classic of expressionism (one need only look to Nosferatu himself) but departs from the expressionism of these latter two films quite strikingly (Massaccesi, 2015, p. 26). Indeed, unlike *Caligari* or *Metropolis*, *Nosferatu* is not (almost) entirely set-bound. In an audacious move, director Murnau and producer Albin Grau took the camera out into real, existent natural locations for shooting – such as the exteriors of Nosferatu's castle and the fictional town of Wisborg.

This enhances the expressionism of the film, as opposed to limiting it, as the abstract figure of Nosferatu is strikingly, and terrifyingly, juxtaposed against natural and urban beauty. As opposed to just constructing horror/terror on a set, Murnau embeds terror into the natural world – it is a force that haunts normality and everydayness.

Nosferatu is a creature from the realm of ghosts and phantoms who has crossed over through the film's many liminal spaces between the natural world and the supernatural (symbolised by the abundance of archways in the film). He embodies the horrors that lie beyond our comprehension and rational concepts which we have confined to the 'safety' of legends and stories. So much so that Hutter (Gustav von Wangenheim), the real estate agent sent to sell Nosferatu property in Wisborg (as per Stoker's novel), initially dismisses the legends of Nosferatu outright – slamming down a book on vampires with self-assured arrogance, as well as laughing off the warnings of the villagers.

It is appropriate, then, that Hutter, after dismissing the supernatural resolutely, can only cower beneath his bed sheets as the terrifying reality of the vampire crosses through the coffin-shaped doorway to drink his blood. The destruction of his rational and unsuperstitious constructs plunges him into a cowardly nihilism, embodied by his almost child-like willing of Nosferatu to go away by hiding behind his bed sheets.

It is in narrative elements such as this that *Nosferatu* also reveals itself as an anti-rationalist picture. The creature of Nosferatu directly opposes and destroys the structures of logic and reason that underly the inhabitants of Wisborg's rejection of superstition and the supernatural. Hutter, as previously remarked, scoffs at the myths and legends of Nosferatu, and further dismisses the anxieties of his wife, Ellen (Greta Schröder), who appears to possess a supernatural clairvoyance and psychic link to Nosferatu himself. Furthermore, we have the Van Helsing-figure of the film: Professor Bulwar (John Gottowt). Unlike the wise and intellectually open character of Stoker's novel (and future film adaptations), Muranu's Bulwar is an ineffectual character, more content to linger behind his microscope than to engage in the investigation to locate the source of the plague that is spreading across Wisborg.

The plague is, of course, a product of Nosferatu and his army of rats. Upon his departure by boat to Wisborg (paralleling the classic voyage of the Demeter in Stoker's novel), Nosferatu's rats begin to spread from port to port, in turn spreading the plague across Europe. Nosferatu, and his plague, eventually reach Wisborg in a haunting shot of the ship of death pulling into the town. A quarantine is imposed by the authorities – but this does little to stop the endless stream of coffins being carried from home to home. Indeed, the apparent safety of the boundaries of the home is illusory.

It is only through the more humanistic character of Ellen that Nosferatu and his plague are confronted and destroyed. She has more of a love for life: she is first seen playing with a kitten, and is distraught when Hutter brings her a bunch of flowers which had been ripped from the earth (Massaccesi, 2015, p. 46). In a way, she appears more 'irrational' than her male companions – more given to emotion and more likely to place faith in her feelings. She actively engages with the book on vampires to find a way to defeat Nosferatu, showing her openness to things that exist beyond our rational comprehension and constructs. Unlike the men, she does not collapse into nihilism and become distraught at the hopelessness of the situation, thanks to the collapse of her rational constructs: rather, she is proactive, evoking Stoker's Van Helsing far more than Bulwar does.

The film does conclude on a somewhat sexist note of Ellen using her sexuality to seduce Nosferatu into staying through the night to drink her blood – such that he forgets the rising sun, which ultimately destroys him. This is sexist in the sense that it implies that despite her investigative and intellectual openness, Ellen is still reduced to an object whose only weapon is her body. Aside from this, *Nosferatu* argues that faith and intellectual

openness are better weapons against the unknown – in this instance, an unknown plague – than rigid rational scientific structures.

Nosferatu and COVID-19

Nosferatu, with its plague plot-line, has become more relevant within the recent COVID-19 pandemic. The virus has utterly taken the world by surprise – seemingly defying our scientific-technological and advanced social capacities. More unsettlingly, we seem totally powerless to stop the spread of the virus. Is a massive breakdown into nihilism just around the corner?

Certainly, relying upon faith and legend as one's bulwark against something like COVID-19, as Ellen does, is, frankly, a terrible idea. We are not facing a plague onset by an ancient vampire monster (though there was talk about the relation between the virus and bats – enough to panic any avid readers of Richard Matheson's iconic vampire novel, *I Am Legend*). Indeed, science is our best weapon against COVID-19; that, and some human social responsibility.

Our biggest weakness is over-confidence and our faith in the infallibility of our rational structures – the idea that our science will always keep us safe, and that our society is incapable of nihilistic collapse. The film's occultism and superstitions aside (both Murnau and Grau were interested in the occult), *Nosferatu* fundamentally captures the unreadiness of overly confident rational societies – who sit assured in their invulnerability to things beyond that which they understand.

Nosferatu was made under similar conditions to which we currently find ourselves, being produced after the Spanish flu pandemic (January 1918 to December 1920), which is estimated to have killed between 17 and 50 million people.

The figure of Nosferatu, in a sense, embodies our attempts to give a face to or rationalise a pandemic, to make it make sense. According to Adam Roberts's recent article in the *Guardian*, 'people do not warm to the existential arbitrariness' of pandemics like COVID-19, and as such, fictional epidemics/pandemics often offer a perceptible origin for pandemics; we want a reason behind our suffering (Roberts, 2020). Fear of the unknown is one of the oldest fears of humankind – we wish to give the unknown a face, to symbolise it, to make it comprehensible. In the film, the maddened people of Wisborg pin the blame for the plague on the insane Reinfield character of Knock (Alexander Granach) – Nosferatu's slave – prompting them to hunt him through the countryside.

Nosferatu encodes our fundamental fear of the unknown-ness of a viral pandemic, one that seemingly comes from that world of phantoms and ghosts due to its supernatural ability to circumvent our rational-scientific constructs to which we cling for safety. Much like the viral pandemic we currently face, Nosferatu's shadow infects the natural world, becoming a part of our everyday lives; like the virus, it lingers on everyday objects, such as in the scene where Nosferatu's shadow opens the door to Ellen's room.

Nosferatu is still extremely relevant for us today, almost 100 years later.

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